

Persevering Faith Hebrews 11:1-7

This morning we return to our study of the book of Hebrews. Last fall we worked our way through chapters 1 through 10. We'll spend the next two and a half months studying chapters 11 through 13. Today is the first of four messages on chapter 11, the famous chapter on faith. One of the most striking (and sobering) verses in this chapter is verse 6:

6 And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

(Maybe you've heard me say this before. . .) You can do a lot of things without faith: you can earn advanced degrees in all sorts of impressive fields; you can make a lot of money; you can get married and raise kids; you can even lead a church without faith. But the one thing you can't do without faith is please God. Since pleasing God is at the core of why we exist, it's essential that we understand what faith is and what it means to live by faith.

My goal is that by the time we get to the end of chapter 11 you and I will have a more intuitive grasp of what it means to live by faith - and therefore what it means to please God. In preparation for these four messages, I'd like for you to identify (now if possible) an area of your life in which you want or need to please God. It could be a ***relationship***, an area of ***obedience***, a ***decision*** on the horizon, or a circumstance in which you need to please God. Over the next four weeks, apply what you learn about faith to this area of your life; learn how to walk by faith in one specific area of your life. We'll encourage you to do this as we go along. By the grace of God, after four weeks of practice we might have a more intuitive, instinctive understanding of what it means to walk by faith.

Chapter 11 is bracketed (of course) by chapter 10 and chapter 12. Chapter 10 ended with an encouragement to persevere. The author wrote that those who persevere are those who live by faith. Chapter 12 will also challenge us to persevere. As we "run with endurance the race set before us" we are to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Jesus will be set forth as the ultimate example of someone who lived by faith and therefore persevered. And so chapter 11 is very strategic in the argument of the book of Hebrews: If we are going to persevere through this life, we need to live by faith in an intentional way.

A Simple Description of Faith (Hebrews 11:1-3) The rest of the chapter contains examples of people who have embodied this type of faith.

1 Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

The author says two related things about faith. First, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for." Faith involves being sure of the things you hope for. This is immediately problematic because the word "hope" normally implies an element of uncertainty (not

being sure of something). If I say, "I hope to drive to Kansas City next week," you probably get the impression that I may drive to KC, but I may not. In modern English, the word hope has an element of uncertainty.

The Bible doesn't normally use the word hope in that way. In the Bible, hope is the anticipation of something that is certain, something that God has promised. The author of Hebrews has already spoken of the believer's "hope" five times in this letter (3:6, 6:11, 6:18, 7:19, 10:23). We're encouraged, for example, in 10:23 to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." We can be sure about "things hoped for" because the things hoped for are things that God has promised. The book of Hebrews emphasizes that God has promised that Jesus our High Priest will lead us safely through this life (no matter what happens to us) and into an eternity in the very presence of God (6:17-20).

Second, faith is "the conviction of things not seen." "Conviction" has basically the same meaning as "assurance" in the first part of this verse. When you have faith, you are sure/certain/convinced about things that you can't see with your eyes. He isn't talking about things like radon (an odorless, colorless gas); he's talking about the realities of the unseen spiritual world and God's promises about the future.

For example, if you have the "conviction of things not seen" you are certain that you have a great High Priest who can rescue you in times of temptation and distress. Instead of thinking that you're alone and abandoned, your faith gives you confidence that Jesus will give you everything you need to be faithful to God this hour and this day and this week. Even though you can't see Jesus, you are convinced that He is strong and compassionate and willing to rescue you.

Listen to verse 1 again: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." D.A. Carson describes faith (based on this verse) in this way: "Faith is confidence and trust in God and His word that what God says is true and therefore trustworthy." If you have faith, you are sure and convinced about the things that God has promised, especially those things related to your future (both in this life and in the next).

The rest of this chapter confirms that faith is based on God's word(s). Faith isn't "staying positive" or "hoping for the best"; faith involves being sure and confident that God will do what He says He will do. This means that if we don't understand who God is or what God has promised we can't really exercise faith. Faith has content. We may have optimism about something we want, but we won't have what the author of Hebrews calls faith. One of the core reasons we study the Bible is because a knowledge of who God is and what He has promised provides the content for our faith.

Verse 2 provides additional motivation to cultivate this type of faith:

2 For by it the men of old gained approval.

The “men of old” are those Old Testament believers (both men and women) who lived by faith. Our author’s comment is that they “gained [God’s] approval” by their faith; God *spoke favorably* about those who exercised faith. It’s a big deal when God says, “Well done.” Sometimes it’s a lot easier to believe that we can cause God grief through our disobedience and our fickleness than that we can cause God pleasure. Our author specifically wants to convince us that we can bring pleasure to the heart of God through our faith. God is a personal being who takes personal pleasure when we believe what He says.

In verse 3 the author establishes that both he and his readers already exercise the type of faith he’s describing.

3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

This verse takes us all the way back to Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The universe that we now see “was not made out of things which are visible.” God didn’t originally begin with raw, unformed matter; Genesis 1:1 implies that He created *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”). How do we know all of this? By faith. We weren’t there to observe all of this happening. We believe this because it is written in Scripture.

Our author’s point seems to be that if we have faith about the origins of the universe (i.e., the ancient past), we should also have faith about the future. Both are based on the word of God. As we go through Hebrews 11 we’ll see time and again how people trusted God’s promises instead of trusting in their own wisdom/strength/understanding. They were confident in a God they couldn’t see about a future they couldn’t see because they had faith.

Three Examples of Faith: Abel, Enoch, and Noah (*Hebrews 11:4-7*) These examples reinforce the basic understanding that faith involves confidence in God’s words (as opposed to confidence in what we can see) and that God takes pleasure in those who live by faith. The first example is Abel:

4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Genesis 4 describes how Cain and Abel each brought offerings to God. Cain brought an offering of something he had grown (since he worked the ground), and Abel brought an animal offering (since he was “a keeper of the flocks”). In Genesis 4 we are told that God was pleased with Abel’s offering but not with Cain’s. Here in Hebrews 11 we are told that Abel offered his sacrifice to God “by faith.” How did our author know it was by faith? Because whenever you see righteousness you are looking at faith. Since Abel’s sacrifice pleased God, we know he offered it in faith. Even though Abel is long dead, he still speaks. Because of his faith we are still listening to and learning from his life.

Verse 5 mentions the faith of Enoch, whose life is described in Genesis 5. Genesis 5:24 reads:

24 Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.

To “walk with God” meant to enjoy close fellowship with God. The commonly-accepted interpretation of this verse is that because Enoch walked so closely with God that God took him directly up into his presence, bypassing the common experience of death. One minute Enoch “was” and the next “he was not, for God took him.” Listen to the author of Hebrews’ commentary on Enoch’s experience.

5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.

As a personal blessing to Enoch, God spared him the experience of death. God, of course, has full freedom to bless Enoch in this way without any obligation to do the same for everybody that pleases Him. Because Enoch lived by faith “he obtained the witness that. . . he was pleasing to God.” Even though Genesis 5 doesn’t specifically mention Enoch’s faith, the author can confidently say that because Enoch pleased God, Enoch lived by faith. Enoch illustrates the truth stated in verse 6:

6 And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Negatively stated, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” This is the fourth time the term “impossible” has been used in Hebrews (6:6, 6:18, 10:4); it refers to something that has no possibility of happening. For example, Hebrews 10:4 says that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” It’s not merely highly unlikely that sacrificing a goat will take away your sin; it is literally not possible for a goat to permanently atone for you sin. In the same way it is not possible to please God without faith.

Stated positively, “for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” In order to please God, we not only need to believe that God “is” (that He exists). We also need to believe that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. The rewards are ultimately the things God has promised: the resurrection, the new heaven and new earth, eternal life, no more sickness, no more death. We’ll see later in Hebrews 11 that in this life we don’t receive everything that God has promised; they are fulfilled in Christ but they are delivered at the end of the age.

The last example of faith we’ll consider today is that of Noah in verse 7. The author picks up the key elements of faith mentioned in verses 1 and 2 when he writes:

7 By faith Noah, being warned *by God* about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Noah is a premier example of someone who had “the conviction of things not seen.” Noah didn’t see the rain clouds coming and then build an ark. He believed God’s announcement that He was going to destroy the earth with a flood. Noah was confident that what God had promised He would do. Noah’s experience also illustrates the truth of verse 6 which says that God is the rewarder of those who seek Him. Noah’s reward was not only physical salvation (his life was saved). He also “became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” Noah inherited the righteousness that God gives to everyone who lives by faith. Noah’s life illustrates that God’s words can be trusted even when they transcend our experience.

Cultivating Faith in Specific Areas of our Lives:

In light of what we’ve seen in this passage, I’d encourage you to do three things this week in relation to the area of your life in which you need to trust God.

First, ***Identify specific commands or promises that God has made concerning this area of your life.*** Remember that faith has content. Faith isn’t merely a vague feeling of commitment; faith is confidence in God and His word (whether it’s a pronouncement about some area of our lives, a command He’s given, or a promise He’s made).

Identifying specific commands or promises (or pronouncements) that God has made concerning an area of your life will reveal (in part at least) the content of your faith. For example, if you’re trusting God for a decision you need to make about your future, you need to understand what God has said about wisdom. James 1:5 says that if you lack wisdom, “ask of God who gives generously and without reproach and it will be given to [you].” If you want to walk by faith (as opposed to walking by fear or walking in anxiety), you need to know that God has promised to give you wisdom. As well, Proverbs 11:14 says that “where there is an abundance of counselors, there is victory.” That verse speaks of the importance of the counsel of others; that’s actually HOW God gives wisdom many times - through others.

Second, ***Discern specific things you can do that express confidence in God’s word(s).*** Noah’s specific expression of faith was building an ark. In this step, you discern specifically what you can do that will express your confidence in the commands or promises or pronouncements that God has made. If you’re trusting God for a decision, based on James 1 (where God promised to give wisdom when we ask in faith) you might decide that daily for the next month you are going to ask God for wisdom. You could even write your daily prayers in a journal; that way you’ll see how your prayers have changed and been refined as you’ve prayed. Based on Proverbs 11:14 have coffee with a couple of friends, lay out your situation, and invite their input.

These are tangible ways that you are expressing, “I am confident that God will give me wisdom.” The alternative would be to muddle through decisions the best you can,

eventually landing on something that makes sense. If you express your confidence in God in these specific ways, you will know that you are living by faith (not perfectly, of course; but you can have a sense that you're living by faith).

Third, ***Exercise your faith in community***. This is the context of the book of Hebrews. Back in chapter 3 the author encouraged them to pay attention to each other's lives so that "there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart." We're supposed to help each other avoid unbelief (and therefore help each other avoid displeasing God). Paul Tournier said, "There are two things we cannot do alone: one is to be married and the other is to be a Christian." You and I were never intended to walk by faith alone. We all need others who can help us identify the Scriptures that apply to our lives and who can help us discern what faith actually looks like in our specific circumstances.

If you are struggling with unbelief, probably the last thing you want to do is live out your faith in community. You may have had some bad experiences with other Christians; you may think that all you're going to get is condemnation and religious cliches. I realize that happens sometimes, but such experiences don't nullify the reality that we were meant to live out our faith in community. This is why we have life groups - honestly. We aren't merely trying to keep you busy or keep you off the streets one night a week. We have life groups so that you can connect with other people so that the body of Christ can do what it does best. One of the things we do in the body of Christ is help each other walk by faith.

Kent and Barbara Hughes ("Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome") tell about the time when Kent was a pastor in a church that was going through some troubles. One night Kent blurted out, "God has called me to do something he hasn't given me the gifts to accomplish. Therefore, God is not good. . . What am I to do?" Barbara's response was this:

"I don't know what you're going to do. But for right now, for tonight, hang on to my faith. Because I believe. I believe that God is good. I believe that he loves us and is going to work through this experience. So hang on to my faith. I have enough for both of us." (p. 23)

There will be times when your faith is weak, times when you need to hang on to the faith of others who believe. This is by God's design. Live out your faith in community.