

Hebrews 11

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[0 : 0 0] Please have Hebrews 11 open, page 1007. Conversations about religion and faith are back on the table again.

! After a while where they were completely unacceptable topics of conversation,! People are talking again about religion and faith and the conversations are taken seriously and people are engaging and there is interest again.

People like Jordan Peterson and Joe Rogan and other high profile people that have a huge following in the world are bringing this topic to bear and people are engaging and the question of faith is back on the table.

People talk about something called a vibe shift. I don't know what I make of that particularly but it's certainly the case that God, religion and faith are talked about in ways that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago.

But one of the things that I've noticed in lots of these conversations is that when people talk about faith, it is often quite generic. It is definitely not clear what or who that faith is in and so I'm listening and people are saying, well faith is very important.

[1 : 2 0] I would like to be a person of faith. I would consider myself a person of faith. faith is the way that we're going to get through this. Faith is a really central theme in the lives of people that seem to be living well at the moment and I'm saying to myself, you keep using this word but it's not clear what you mean by it.

And that's all well and good. We can say that. We can ask that question and it's an important question to ask but I wonder as Christians how many of us would be able to describe what it means for us to have Christian faith? If someone asked you what your faith was in, you'd be okay there. The answer is Jesus. Okay, we're clear on that. That's all right. But then they say, well what does that actually mean? What does the life of faith involve? We might say, well following Jesus, living for God, trusting what the Bible says or something else along those lines. And all of those things are true obviously but is there more that we could say? Is there something else that actually would give substance and clarity to that question? And that's the question the author turns to now in Hebrews chapter 11. We follow up where we left off last week. If you look back chapter 10 verse 35, he's saying, listen, don't give up. Don't give up. Don't throw away your confidence which has great reward for you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. Keep going. Don't go back. Keep going. How will you do that? How will you keep going? How will you not throw away your reward? Chapter 10 verse 38, he quotes Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4, my righteous one shall live by faith. There it is. And what he's saying is you live this life, you persevere by faith in the God of the covenant. That is what you will need if you're going to persevere and endure to the end. That's what we need if we are going to persevere to the end. And having then quoted that text, what we need is to live a life of faith. He says, all right, and what I mean by faith is this. And he gives us chapter 11. And we get a definition at the beginning, followed by examples of what that looks like in the lives of the Old Testament saints. And it's like he's pointing at them and he's saying, do you remember him? Look at that. Look at them. Look at him. And he's saying, that's what faith looks like in real life situations. And then he says something as well about the motivation for that. He holds out something to us in the chapter to say, look, here's why the life of faith is worth it. So that's where we're going to go.

An explanation, examples, and then the end, the end goal. Point number one, an explanation. Look at verse one. There are two parts to what explanation or definition. The first is this. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Hope is a big theme. We'll have seen that in the book of Hebrews. We hope for, or we hope in something that we're looking forward to. And much of this letter has that forward focus. Looking ahead to the world to come. Chapter two, verse five, our Sabbath rest.

Chapter four, our eternal inheritance. Chapter nine, and the great day of the Lord. We saw that last week, 1025.

[4 : 47] The great day of the Lord that is in the future. And we're looking forward to those things. The future holds the fulfillment of those things. Each one, the world to come, Sabbath rest, our inheritance, the great day of the Lord. And faith is the assurance of those things in the present.

And what does that mean? Well, I think the word here is assurance is tricky to translate. Confidence or foundation, some translations go with. I think given the context, the best translation is substance. Faith is the substance of things hoped for. What this means is that faith gives substance in the here and now to things that we don't yet hold in our hands. Things that we can't touch. Things that we can't actually physically see. Such that it's as if we possess them already.

You see this in the life of Abraham. Look at verse nine. By faith, Abraham went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise for he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. He is looking forward. He is hoping in something in the future. And the way he lives in the presence gives some substance to that. It demonstrates it.

His eyes were fixed on the heavenly city. And by faith, that reality in the future was so real to him that he lived the way he did in the present, trusting that God would work out his plans.

Now you think about it, that's our experience, isn't it? The world to come that we we have our faith in, that we are looking forward to. It lies in the future. We will receive our eternal inheritance in the future. But our faith takes hold of it in the present in such a way that our life decisions now are shaped by that day. We live with confidence. We live with certainty. They are the substance of our future hope. The substance of things hoped for. Faith is also the conviction of things not seen, verse 1. The conviction of things not seen. Now again, this word translated conviction here is tricky. I think proof or demonstration are actually better options. So what he means is the life of faith demonstrates or proves the existence of a reality that we can't see by ordinary sense perception. Life lived by faith in the invisible God. He is invisible. He is spirit.

[7 : 31] Holding on to promises made centuries ago is unavoidably based on things not seen. We can't see the promises that were made centuries ago and we can't see the invisible God. But through faith, the believer is convinced of their truth, convinced of their reality, and so we live now accordingly.

This is what happens when the Holy Spirit does his work of illumination and conviction. You think about it, there was a time for many of you when you didn't believe these things and now you do. I know in my own life there was a time when I had no interest in God and I thought the people that did were foolish. Now I'm convinced, utterly convinced that Jesus is who he says he is. I am certain that he was raised from the dead for our salvation and I'm confident that I'm going to be with him in glory for eternity and I would die for that truth.

It's all based on things unseen. But the Holy Spirit has granted me, he has granted us who believe, faith and that gives it all substance in our lives. And the way that we live, those lives demonstrate that these things are as real for us as things that can be seen. By the way, just to say, if you have the privilege of being a covenant child, particularly boys and girls, those of you that are covenant children, there may never be a time when you didn't believe these things. That's a great thing.

That's actually what you want. You want to grow up never knowing a day when you didn't believe these things.

But that faith is based on things you can't see, but that the Holy Spirit has convinced you of. You believe them because the Holy Spirit has worked that faith in you and that faith will grow and grow and grow and be more and more visible in your life as you get older.

See how it works with Noah. Verse 7. By faith, Noah being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear, constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. He was told about something as yet unseen and it shaped how he lived in the present.

[9 : 56] He was assured of its truth and he hammered away and painted and did all that he needed to do, despite the complete absence of water anywhere nearby. And what that did was demonstrate a reality of an unseen God, despite the mockery of those around him.

That is Christian faith. John Owen says the Christian makes his life on things invisible. We make our lives as Christians on things invisible. These Hebrews have shown this at the most fundamental level. Verse 3.

By faith we understand, collectively he's saying we who are listening, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

The author is saying, look at your own faith. You already believe that most fundamental thing, that God is our creator and that the world he spoke into existence, the entire universe, came about by his word out of nothing. You believe that. You didn't see it, but you believe it and you shape your lives around its truth. Now at this point, I can imagine maybe you're here and you're critical of this. You're looking into things. You're thinking to yourself, well, look, that's all well and good. But what you're describing is just wishful thinking.

Like the fan who says that they know that their team will win. I know it. I know they're going to win. And they talk about their team winning with great confidence and they do everything that they do in their lives around the fact that they are unshakably confident that their team will win.

[11:36] You could say that they're living in the present in light of what they hope for, the as yet unseen victory of their team. Now I'd say, well, how is Hebrews 11 any different than that? Well, because at root, our faith is based on the promises of God.

That fan's confidence might be reasonable. Their team might be better than the opposition, but they can't be certain. They can't have absolute certainty. And therefore that hope is always a hope for the best. There may be lots of factors around that mean that what they believe in and what they're hoping for is likely to come to pass. But it's always a hope for the best.

It isn't founded on certainty. It isn't founded on promises that can be relied upon. That's why it's different. And what we're talking about here is different. We are relying on promises that the God of the Bible made from the beginning about His Son, and His Son, the Lord Jesus, then came into the world and did what those Old Testament promises said He would do. He fulfilled them. He brought them to pass. And He showed that God keeps His promises. And as we've told in Hebrews, Jesus Himself brought in a new covenant and acted on better promises, promises of a future we can really trust. Faith in God is not wishful thinking. It is not hope that is hope for the best. It is grounded on the promises of God.

Faith is an assurance, is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen. Well, next let's turn to the examples, point number two, the examples. We've had this method already in the book of Hebrews. Back in chapter 6, the author called his hearers to be imitators of those who had gone before. He even named Abraham as an example. But now he provides a long list of saints who remain steadfast through persecution and trials, and he urges us all to imitate them. Just as back in chapter 3, he mentioned the wilderness generation as a negative example of being faithless, here this list is a positive example of faithful people to be imitated. Look at verse 4. At the outset, we have Abel by faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. He's closely followed by Enoch, verse 5, by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found because God had taken him. Now before he was taken, he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith, it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Both these men, Abel and Enoch, had faith. Abel's sacrifice was accepted and Cain, his brother, was not. And Enoch was taken into heaven because he pleased God through his faith. The basic point is that God cannot be pleased apart from faith. If you will come to God, by definition, you must believe that he exists, and that he is good, and that he wants to bless you. But if we come this way, if we do that, if we put our faith in him, we come the same way that these men did. That gets to actually one of our big problems.

You see, the truth is, our temptation is to believe all kinds of other things, things rather than believing that God exists and he rewards those who seek him.

[15:24] Our temptation is to believe that the things that the culture holds before us with the promises of life and success and blessing are much more worth our time and effort. And especially that is the case when life is tough, when life is tough, precisely because we're trying to follow Christ. When through our decisions to be faithful and obedient, we come unstuck, life gets difficult. The temptation then to go elsewhere is incredibly powerful. And that is why the example of these ancients in chapter 11 is so vital for us. So let me go through a number of them here. When we are tempted to give in to the mockery of those around us, when we feel the pressure from the culture to conform to the culture and not to the things of God, again, consider Noah. Verse 7, he built an ark

miles from any body of water. His friends and his neighbors laughed at him for doing this. He had been told that God was going to bring a judgment. You can imagine the neighbors coming past. Morning, Noah. Still waiting for that judgment, are you?

The sun's shining. The ground's dry. There's no water anywhere near. And this guy's building a massive boat. But Noah took God at his word and he kept preparing his vessel. When we're tempted to doubt the promises of God, the promise that God has given that he will save a people for himself and that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not prevail. When we feel like our evangelism is unimpressive and a bit pointless. We don't seem to get anywhere. We share the gospel. We hold out the hope of Christ to people and they just seem completely disinterested. In that case, consider the example of Abraham and Sarah. Verse 12, by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. Why do we share the gospel with our friends and neighbors? Why do we go on doing it?

Why in the IPC do we go on planting churches despite the opposition in our culture? Because we are convinced that God has given his son the nations as his inheritance. We are convinced that he has promised descendants as numerous as the sand on the beach, the grains of sand on the beach, and we trust him to use the preaching of the gospel to build his church. When we struggle with the temptation to give up the fight. That happens, doesn't it? Some of you here this evening might be right at this point. Do you know what? Actually, it's too difficult. I'm going to give up the fight. Well, consider Moses. Verse 23, by faith, 24, by faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured a seeing him who is invisible. The fleeting pleasures of sin. Moses knew that sin was enjoyable in the moment. The temptation to sin that is before us is attractive to us because we know it will be enjoyable in the moment. But what did Moses do? He didn't give in to that. Instead, he saw with the eyes of faith that choosing obedience to God, choosing to identify with Christ all those years before Jesus came was worth more than anything he would enjoy through sin. It's the same when we pass up the instant pleasures that sin offer us now because we trust by faith that obedience is better. When our heart breaks because we have to give up that relationship that isn't pleasing to God. Or in that moment we fight really hard to hold our tongue despite the desire to say what we want to say. [19:52] Or we fight our appetites despite where those appetites want to lead us. When we do that, by faith we are acknowledging that the fleeting pleasures of sin aren't worth comparing to our heavenly reward. Often in these cases we can feel a bit hard done by. Or we can resent God because we don't have the life that we wanted. Well, consider Moses.

The fleeting pleasures of sin are not worth choosing at the expense of our reward. What about when we get frustrated with the regular, ordinary, culturally strange, some would say boring nature of church life?

Doing ministry God's way. The slow work of preaching the word, observing the sacraments, being diligent in prayer. Well then consider Joshua verse 30. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. God told him to gather the priests to march around Jericho seven times, seven times blowing trumpets. Very odd behavior. Very counter-cultural.

But he did it because God told him. And he stuck at it because God told him. Don't despise the distinctiveness of the church in our culture. When we gather, we read God's word, we preach his word, we pray to him, we come to his table and we feed on Christ by faith because he told us to do this. There's nothing boring about it. What we're doing is engaging with the living God, the God of all the earth. And we're doing what he has called us to do out of obedience because we know that that is what he will bless. It's really interesting. And part of these conversations about faith and religion and everything else, there has been research that reveals a rise in church attendance in the UK over the last couple of years. And those who were surveyed said that they were drawn to the Bible and to ancient religious practice. Now for years in the church, we have been told that we need to be as relevant as possible. Well, it seems actually that the world wants the church to be the church. But even if they didn't, this is God's appointed means to gather a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. So we go on doing these things.

Why? We do them by faith. What about when we're tempted to compromise because of fear? We could consider the example of Moses' parents. Verse 23, they stood against the state.

[22 : 44] They did what was right, even though the king's edict told them to do something else. But then also consider Rahab. Verse 31, by faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. Joshua chapter 2, the king of Jericho sent his men to find Joshua's spies. Rahab hid the spies and sent the pursuers away. She put herself in danger for the sake of God's people. She trusted that honoring God was worth the risk. Faith puts its head above the parapet in support of the gospel and in solidarity with God's people, whatever the risk.

And it does that. The life, the faithful person does that even when those people aren't as sophisticated or as cool or as kind of savvy as we would like them to be. A quirky street preacher gets arrested or a social media post gets a Christian canceled. We stand with them by faith because faith triumphs over the fear of man. Surely one of the things that these examples teach us is that Christian faith is therefore visible. Now there's a sense I know in which all faith is visible because anyone's ultimate beliefs inform the way that they live. If you think being rich is the most important thing in the world, the way that you live will show that. You'll be greedy, you'll be materialistic, and so on. But if Christ is the most important thing to you, it will show as well. And the last example I want to highlight here as we consider these examples challenges us when the public nature of our faith brings opposition. So consider these unnamed men and women in verses 34 to 39.

Now some of this list, as he lists what's going on here, some of this were called the heroic things. Shutting the mouths of lions, verse 34. Putting armies to flight. And we think, yes, Lord, use me to do that. I don't mind being called to that life of faith. But look at the others, verse 36.

Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with a sword. Now there were numerous others like this of whom the world is not worthy.

[25 : 07] And they all bear witness, every one of them, to the goodness and the faithfulness of God. So will we take it on faith that whatever we might endure by way of hardship or trial for naming the name of Christ in our day is worth it? Because God has something better for us in the future.

He does. He does. In fact, there is a glimpse of that reward that bookends the chapter. And here's point number three, the end, the goal. Verse two, by faith, the people of old received their commendation.

Verse four, Abel was commended as righteous. Verse five, Enoch was commended as having pleased God. Verse 39, those who suffered, all of them were commended through their faith.

In the end, when you strip it all away, isn't that ultimately what we want? The commendation of God on your life. That we would hear, well done, my boy, my girl, when we stand before him and receive what these ancients looked forward to. The current England rugby team has a culture now that when you get your first cap, if it's possible, they invite your parents to come in to the changing room and give you your first cap to present it to you. And what's happening in that moment on the one hand is the England coach is saying, this is a much bigger thing than this individual. We want to honor their family in this whole process. But there's something as well, isn't there? When that cap is handed over, all the hard work, all the effort and all the sacrifice has been worth it. This is what you were aiming for. And here you are. And they give over the cap. Well done, my boy.

There's a little hint there of what we're looking forward to when God on the last day commends us for living by faith in his promises and persevering and enduring like the ancients did as we go forward to that which is unseen. We can't see it. But by faith, it is a reality in the presence and we live like that now.

[27 : 38] Look at these examples. Consider the way they lived their lives, the sacrifices that they made, the courage that they showed, the way that they stood up because they believed by faith that it was all true and it was going to be worth it. If we are going to persevere, if we are going to get that commendation, if we're going to keep going with the kind of faith that these examples hold out, and we have an even better example to follow, of course, from our perspective, we have seen the one on whom the ancients hope was founded.

The one who came and lived by perfect faith in his father and who because of that was rejected and suffered the death we deserved and yet still faithfully endured. We have seen him. We're going to remember all of that in a moment as we come to the table. We're going to taste it. We're going to

smell it.

And by faith, we're going to participate. The one in whom the ancients hoped is the Jesus of our history. And of course, we don't just have his example, but we have his finished work. We have the presence of his spirit working within us. And so we have even greater promises on which to lean our faith. Keep going. We look to an invisible future, but by faith, we believe it and we give it substance in the way that we live now. And as we do that together, we encourage one another to keep going. Keep going. Let's pray. Our Father.