

July 19, 2015

By Faith

Hebrews 11:1 – 40

We heard last week the impassioned plea of the writer to draw near to God and not shrink back. Draw near because Christ has opened the way for us through the veil of His flesh, by His death and resurrection, to come near to God. And he ends that section by saying: **38** *but My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.* **39** *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.* I believe the writer means us to understand that drawing near has a lot to do with faith. My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he doesn't – I am not pleased – My soul has no pleasure in him. Furthermore he says, this faith is instrumental in preserving our souls. So the writer seems to be linking drawing near and not shrinking back, to having faith. And indeed he spends this next chapter dwelling on the nature of faith. What is faith? What does it look like? How do we get it?

First of all he defines what faith is: **1** *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* If you're a Christian and you've memorized any verse in the Bible besides John 3:16, it's probably this one. But what does it mean? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is linked to some kind of hope we have for which faith is vital. And faith is a conviction that something unseen exists. In other words there is a hope toward which faith points, and it only seems to work in places where we can't see. And it is this faith that pleases God: **2** *For by it the people of old received their commendation,* or divine approval. Furthermore, you cannot please God without it: **6** *And without faith it is impossible to please Him,*

Faith is the assurance, he says, of things hoped for. The word 'assurance' is a word that describes something of substance, it has real existence, real being. In fact some translations use the word substance here because the writer already used it in chapter 1, verse 3 to describe the Son as the exact representation of God's nature or substance. In other words, faith is real and substantial. It is not some sort of optimistic outlook in spite of the evidence. It is not, as Mark Twain observed, '...believing what you know ain't so.' It is not, as the Skeptic's Dictionary defines it, a 'non-rational belief that is contrary to the sum of the evidence for that belief'. Faith, the writer says, is real and substantial. You might say it has mass. Faith looks at the things hoped for and says, 'That's real'. Faith is not some sort of positive confession. It is not denying reality. It's not pretending that things are good when they are really bad. It isn't trying to name it and claim it. Faith looks at the thing hoped for and has the assurance that it has it.

Look at the second part: faith is '... *the conviction of things not seen*'. 'Conviction' here is a word that means a proof, evidence, something by which a thing is proved. Faith is evidence of things that cannot be seen. And to show us what he means, the writer says in verse 3: *By faith 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 writer says that faith is the evidence of unseen things and then directly relates that to the example of creation. Verse 1 says that faith is the evidence of things we cannot yet see, and verse 3 says that faith understands that everything we see – the world and our universe – was made out of that which we cannot see – that is, the Word of God. God spoke – the unseen word; and the universe – the visible world – leapt into existence.

And we know this is true because Romans 1:20 says: *'For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes and His divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.'* The evidence that there is a God is that all the created things in our world very clearly point to a Maker. And Hebrews 11:3 says that the **evidence** that God made the world is faith. I think this means that faith is the perception of the handprints of God on what we see around us. All the order, beauty and greatness of creation are evidence that God made the world – that He exists and stands transcendent over everything. And our seeing the handprints of God should cause something to rise up in us – faith.

Because the direction of faith is Godward. **6** *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.* The point of faith is to draw near to God. Faith is about believing in God, and drawing near to Him. And faith is knowing that He rewards those who seek Him. What is the reward here? The context of the verse makes it clear that the reward of seeking God is finding God. That is, **the reward of faith is God Himself**. In other words faith is all about drawing near to God. Faith says, 'Knowing God is worth everything'.

In fact that is the testimony of this chapter. Nothing in this world can be compared to the value and satisfaction and joy of knowing God. That is what faith points to. God Himself. You see the foundation of your faith has everything to do with the object of your faith. What I see this text telling us over and over is that, at the bottom, faith sees God as infinitely worthy of our hope and lays everything on the line for Him. From Abel all the way through the rest of the list here in chapter eleven, the object of these people's faith was so transcendent over their circumstances and situations that whether they lived or died, they never traded in the value of knowing God for something less.

And because they saw God as their highest ambition, His promises held them through thick and thin. Faith holds the promises of God as more real than the circumstances around us may dictate. Noah bore the criticism and disdain of his friends and neighbors because God told Him a flood was coming, get ready. And he did. Abraham lived as an alien and stranger in the world because his eyes were on the promise. He trusted the word of God so completely that even though God told him to sacrifice his only son, he also believed that somehow, some way, God would make good on His promise that, *"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."* Isaac in turn blessed Jacob and Esau, trusting that God could take the sinful deception of Jacob and use it to complete His word. Jacob, by faith, turned a lifetime of heartache and trouble into blessing for his troublesome children; and Joseph believed that God would bring his descendants back to the land of promise at the right time.

Moses, *'...considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.'* And the writer records, *'By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.'* Faith, therefore, rests on the promises of God and considers them more real than anything in this temporal world; even the anger of a king. Faith does not operate in a vacuum, nor is it blind. There is nothing to be said for blind faith. Although faith only works in the dark, faith has eyes. It sees Him who is invisible. Faith looks to the future. It is a life lived not for the present – but for the future. A life that is not tied to the things of this life so much that we fear to leave it. Faith focuses not on the present reality and the rewards of today, but on the rock-solid promises of God and the rewards of eternity. It is visionary faith – a faith that holds on to the promise and looks forward to the reward. Faith sees from this life into the next.

And in a very temporal sense, faith is risky. If you throw everything on God, you might lose something or someone that is very dear to you. But faith looks at the loss, and says 'It's worth it – God, You're worth it all'. Hudson Taylor, once said, ***"Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith."*** Faith is inherently risky. Not in the sense that when we throw everything on God that we lose in any sense. But risky in the sense that things may not turn out as we hope. When you say to God, 'I'm Yours – my life is Yours, my family is Yours, my past, my present, my future are all Yours, my choices, my preferences, everything is Yours, Lord' – you risk that God will overrule your dreams and send you down roads not of your own choosing.

Living by faith always presents us with a choice – 'Will we trust God to rescue us, or will we save ourselves?' That was the issue Moses' parents faced. Would they kill their son and save themselves – or would they save their son and die themselves? There was no compromise – no middle ground – faith demands all or nothing. Circumstances will tempt us to save ourselves – faith will cause us to trust God – whether we live or die. Our culture today is into risk-avoidance – not risk taking, and we in the church have to a large degree bought into that philosophy. But faith is for risk-takers. Men and women, young and old, who will take God at His word and believe Him to the hilt. *I would recommend you either believe God up to the hilt, or else not to believe at all. Believe this book of God, every letter of it, or else reject it. There is no logical standing place between the two. Be satisfied with nothing less than a faith that swims in the deeps of divine revelation; a faith that paddles about the edge of the water is poor faith at best. It is little better than a dry-land faith, and is not good for much.* - C. H. Spurgeon

You see, the text tells us that **13** *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.* **14** *For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.* **15** *If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.* **16** *But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city. Faith does not require the confirmation of our senses to believe. All these that the Bible counts as faithful – as not shrinking back, died without receiving what God had promised them. But with the eyes of faith they saw it as a done deal. Because the truth is, most of the promises of God are not for the here and now, but for the there and then. **They are not for this world, but the next.**

Some of the promises are for now – *'I will never leave you nor forsake you'* – but most of the promises are for the future – *'Behold, I come quickly.'* *'I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am you may be also.'* The promises of God are like your lover who waits in a far country until the day you can be united. All your desire, all your thoughts, all your affections stretch toward the day when that will happen. And faith sees those promises and desires them above all else. **It is to be so gripped by God that nothing short of God will do.** And this causes you to regard your position in this world as a stranger in a strange land – a sojourner. 'Sojourn' is an old fashioned word meaning **'I'm not staying, I'm just passing through.'** And people who talk like that obviously are looking away to the place they actually regard as home – Heaven. *'If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.'* But they didn't mean the country they came from – they were not looking back, they were looking forward – and that helped them to not shrink back to destruction.

And God is not ashamed of this kind of person. *'God is not ashamed to be called their God.'* What a remarkable statement. I don't know of any other statement in the Bible quite like that. When he says 'God is not ashamed to be called their God' – that implies that there might be some people that God is ashamed of – but not these! And to say that means that if God were to say, 'I am ashamed to be Michael Sandberg's God' – then He would not be my God at all – because God would not do anything shameful. It is not as though some Christians cause God shame and others do not – it is that some who call themselves Christians are really not – because God is not their God.

Living by faith will cause us to burn our bridges. Bridge-burning faith says, 'I have chosen a path to follow, and I am not leaving the option open for retreat.' And this is not something you do casually – because if the bridges are burned – you have no choice but to go on. Look at Moses' choices. First of all he *refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter*. As the son of Pharaoh's daughter he had the whole world at his feet. Burning that bridge meant hardship and poverty and ill-treatment instead of comfort and ease and popularity and wealth. Some would say that it is possible to remain a son of Pharaoh's daughter and still follow God. But what they do not recognize is that remaining there but trying to maintain a godly testimony will tear you apart and eventually destroy you – because the two are mutually exclusive. Pharaoh's court and God's call have different goals, different values and different agendas. You cannot serve two masters – you will love the one and hate the other; or be devoted to one and despise the other.

He also made the choice: *'...to be mistreated with the people of God [rather] than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.* Now that is not a choice that is very attractive to many people. 'Oppression or pleasure, hmmm – I think I'll choose oppression.' I think what Moses realized that many do not today is that just as the pleasures of sin are fleeting – so is oppression. That is what Paul says in 2 Corinthians: *'For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory.'* The question is, 'Do you want a quick thrill that leaves you with nothing in the end – or do you want momentary affliction that gives you eternal payback?' He also thought it was better to experience suffering for the sake of Christ than be rich. *He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.* Quite honestly, this is not a choice most Christians contemplate. The church in America has adopted a doctrine that says wealth equals blessing – poverty equals cursing and no one in their right mind chooses cursing.

But faith has its eyes on what is ahead and not on what is behind. Behind are all the riches and comforts and ease and pleasures of Egypt, which do not last – but ahead are the immeasurable riches of Christ which are eternal. Christians who live like this, know that the ultimate payoff is not here – but there. And for centuries the dominant motive for being a Christian was the hope of Heaven – but in most evangelical circles today, the dominant motive is what can Christ do for me? How does this benefit me? You were made for God's glory – He wasn't made for yours.

When I think about the choice Moses made, I think about those two young men who sold themselves into slavery so that they might bring the gospel to the slaves on a plantation in an island in the West Indies. The owner of that island had vowed that no chaplain, no pastor, no missionary or anybody else who preached the gospel would ever be allowed on the island. If they found themselves shipwrecked and washed ashore – he'd throw them right back in. These two young men heard this story, heard about the thousands of slaves on this island that had never heard of Christ and took the only course open to them – to sell themselves into slavery so that they might make some glad in God. That was risky. The voyages then were long and hard, they might die even before they got there – once they got there they might be worked or beaten to death or sicken and die from malnutrition or disease – but they looked at the risks – and they looked at Jesus – and said 'He's worth it.' And as the ship pulled away from the shore, one of them was heard to proclaim: 'May the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of His suffering!'

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. We look at faith like this and we say, 'That's what I want – I want overthrowing faith, ruling faith, faith that shuts the mouths of lions and fire-quenching faith. I want faith that defeats whole armies and causes the dead to live again – I want that kind of faith!' And indeed faith will always produce stories of triumph and victory and overcoming – that's the kind of faith it is – because that's the kind of God we serve.

But having faith does not always mean that God will keep you from suffering. In the list we just read, these people were commended for their faith. Through faith they conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises and stopped the mouths of lions. And verse 39 says all these were commended through their faith. That is they received the divine approval. But that commendation also includes others who did not conquer kingdoms or stop the lion's mouths or quench the fires of persecution or escape the edge of the sword. Instead, the writer says, '*Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-- 38 of whom the world was not worthy--wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

What happens to your faith when you trust God and still get tortured? What happens to your faith when you trust God and you still get thrown in the dungeon, or get sawed in half – or have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? What if, in God's great scheme of things, dying is really living? Or loss is really gain? What happens to your faith when you've prayed and prayed and the answer seems to never come? What happens to your faith when God does not heal your friend of cancer even though you've prayed in faith? You see, just because you have faith, does not mean that every diagnosis will be negative, or that tragedy will never strike, or that ill-health and poverty means that God is absent or you've somehow lost His approval or blessing. Overcoming faith may also mean suffering faith. It isn't too hard to believe in God when lions and armies are running from you – but what about when they don't?

The New Hebrides Islands had no Christian influence before John Williams and James Harris from the London Missionary Society landed in 1839 on the island of Erromanga. Both of these missionaries were killed and eaten by cannibals on November 20 of that year, only minutes after going ashore. Forty-eight years later John G. Paton wrote, '*Thus were the New Hebrides baptized with the blood of martyrs; and Christ thereby told the whole Christian world that He claimed these islands as His own*' And in 1858, Paton and his wife Mary sailed to the New Hebrides. They reached the island of Tanna on November 5, and in March the next year both his wife and his newborn son were dead of the fever. When Paton initially went before his church elders to share his burden to go to the New Hebrides as a missionary, one of the men, Mr. Dickson exclaimed, "The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!" The memory of Williams and Harris on Erromanga was only 19 years old. But to this Paton responded: '*Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms; and in the great day my resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.*'

God always has far better things in mind for us than we can even imagine. And we need a faith that holds tightly to His promises. A faith that says, 'I believe that God is – and that all His ways are good and just and that He is for me and not against me, and in spite of how things look, in spite of how I feel, in defiance of all indicators to the contrary – I believe!' At the end of the day, faith is built upon a God who doesn't tell us everything, but He does tell us enough to make it through the day; He does not always rescue us like we think He should, but He does come through in the clutch – every time – without exception; He does not always give us a smooth path, but He is always walking with us to carry us over the rough patches; He does not always shut the mouths of the lions, or send the armies fleeing, but He does cause the lions and the armies to serve the purpose of God which is always for His glory and our good.

How do we get this faith? The writer concludes by saying, *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.* In other words, all these lived a life of faith that was commended by God, and yet they did not see the fulfillment of that faith. They had the promise, but died before they received the promise. And so you have to ask, what is the promise to which their faith was looking? The promise goes all the way back to Genesis where God tells Adam and Eve that sin and death will not triumph in the end, but that He would send a Savior who would be bruised for our iniquity so that the serpent's head would be crushed. And they heard this promise and held on to this promise and died in hope of this promise, and God commended that faith. In other words, their salvation came through faith.

In Romans 10, Paul tells us the birthplace of faith in our hearts is in the very word of God. *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.* Faith is not a talent some people have for believing. Faith is not an emotional response to a tearful tale. You can't work your way into having faith. Faith is something born in our hearts by the word of God. Paul tells the Ephesians: '*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*' 2,000 years ago God sent His promise into the world to die on a cross to atone for our sins and crush the head of the devil. And on the third day, Jesus rose from the tomb in victory over sin and death and hell so that all who believe in Him would be brought near to God. I pray that the word you heard this morning will birth faith in your heart. I pray that you would begin to see Jesus as more valuable, more precious, than anything this world could offer and draw near today.

Our gracious and merciful Father,

Grant us a faith that does not wither in the furnace of affliction, or fade in the abundance of blessing. Cause our faith in You to grow and not shrink. Lift our eyes and wean our hearts from the fleeting pleasures of sin and fix our hope and affections on the preciousness of Christ, and the glories of Heaven. Do not let us be content with just what we can see and hear and taste and touch, but give us the soul-satisfying faith that doesn't look at the circumstances and draw conclusions about God – but looks at God and draws conclusions about our circumstances. May our faith be as strong when the armies are fleeing as when they are not, whether we are eaten by cannibals or we live to serve Your purpose in other ways. May our faith be an unrelenting, God-exalting, circumstance-defying testimony to Your greatness in this world – to the praise of the Risen Lamb of God and in His unconquerable name we pray, Amen.