

**Hebrews Bible Study- Year 2**  
**Lesson 5 Notes / Hebrews 11:1-3**  
**The Centrality of Faith**

Introduction:

As we come to the famous “Hall of Faith” chapter in Hebrews 11 this week, it is vital that we remember the teaching that has just come before. Context is always crucial, but as one author has specifically noted about this passage,

“Even Christians who find some of the earlier teaching of this letter difficult to understand, turn to this chapter for help, especially in times of crisis or when their own faith seems weak. And they do not go away disappointed. These courageous heroes beckon the reader on daring exploits and encourage the contemporary believer by their persistent endurance. But it is important to recognize at the start, that the chapter cannot be taken in isolation. Its teaching builds on what has gone before. The artificial chapter division has obscured the fact that this famous chapter must be read as a sequel to the previous verses.” (Brown)

With this in mind, we should recall that the author had just addressed the difficult topic of apostasy in 10:26-39, and in doing so had urged his readers to remember the truth that genuine believers will persevere. They may have momentary lapses of faith, but they do not utterly “**shrink back**” or forsake the Lord. In this we saw the author’s deep pastoral concern, and desire that none in his audience would be deceived and thereby miss out on the grace found in Jesus. In verses 37-38 Habakkuk 2:3-4 was referenced, showing that those who have been declared righteous, *live* by their faith. This is the way it has always been for the genuine believer; faith is not a one- time event for them, but rather a way of life.

This truth, touched on often in the book of Hebrews, is a key theme the author will continue to unpack. For most in his original audience, the author was convinced that genuine conversion had indeed occurred, but what was needed in these immature believers was growth

and greater endurance. By highlighting the faith of many Old Testament saints, the author seeks to inspire his readers to look beyond their temporal circumstances, to the grand eternal inheritance that awaited them in the Lord.

### **The supremacy of faith and its definition**

Throughout Scripture the topic of faith is emphasized often. Simply put, faith has always been the only way back to God- the key to a restored relationship with Him. As Hebrews 11:6 states, **“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.”** As we go deeper into chapter 11, the author will take us chronologically through the Old Testament, highlighting key characters who lived by their faith, and died by their faith. In each example, attention will first be drawn to the character’s faith, and then to the actions inspired by that faith. Through this we will see that God honoring works are always a byproduct of faith, never a means of obtaining salvation.

In our verses for today, faith is defined simply, and yet not very broadly. Therefore, to grasp the depth of what the chapter will teach us, defining faith in a broader sense will be helpful. The Greek word for faith used throughout the New Testament, 24 times in this chapter alone, is *pistis*. Vines Complete Expository Dictionary defines it as,

“a firm persuasion or conviction based upon hearing, a firm conviction producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth, a personal surrender to Him, conduct inspired by such surrender”

Going further, John MacArthur writes,

“Faith is a belief in or confident attitude toward God, involving commitment to His will for one’s life. Faith means having utter confidence in the promises of God. According to Hebrews 11, many people in the Old Testament experienced faith as a key element of their spiritual lives. Faith is part of the Christian life from beginning to end. Genuine saving faith involves a personal attachment to Christ, best thought of as a combination of two ideas: reliance on Christ and commitment to Him. Saving faith involves personally depending on the finished work of Christ’s sacrifice as the only basis for forgiveness and

entrance into heaven. But saving faith is also a personal commitment of one's life to following Christ in obedience to His commands."

Steve Lawson, speaking on the topic of faith in his excellent message "Assurance of Things Hoped for" said it this way,

"Faith in an inner attitude of complete trust and reliance upon God. It is a confident belief in God and His Word that activates the life and launches us forward into paths of obedience that pursue the will of God."

CH Spurgeon spoke of saving faith this way,

"True faith, in its very essence rests in this- a leaning upon Christ. It will not save me to know that Christ is Savior; but it will save me to trust Him to be my Savior. I shall not be delivered from wrath to come by believing that His atonement is sufficient, but I shall be saved by making that atonement my trust, my refuge, my all. The pith, the essence of faith lies in this- a casting one-self on the promise. It is not the lifebuoy on board a ship that saves the man when he is drowning, nor is it his belief that it is an excellent and successful invention. No! He must have it around his loins, or in his hand upon it or else he will sink."

Considering these excellent statements about biblical faith, we can observe that faith is the means by which we are saved, *and* also the way we grow. As Romans 1:16-17 says, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'But the righteousness shall live by faith.'**" Martin Luther struggled to understand these truths for a long time, but history reveals that when the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to believe, the Reformation was unleashed. Speaking of this he said,

"At first I clearly saw that the free grace of God is absolutely necessary to attain to light and eternal life; and I anxiously and busily worked to understand the word of Paul in Rom. 1:17: The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel. I questioned this passage for a long time and labored over it, for the expression **'righteousness of God'**

barred my way. This phrase was customarily explained to mean that the righteousness of God is a virtue by which He is Himself righteous and condemns sinners. In this way all the teachers of the church except Augustine had interpreted the passage. They had said: The righteousness of God, that is, the wrath of God. But as often as I read this passage, I wished that God had never revealed the Gospel; for who could love a God who was angry, who judged and condemned people? This misunderstanding continued until, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I finally examined more carefully the word of Habakkuk 2:4: **‘The just shall live by his faith.’** From this passage I concluded that life must be derived from faith.... Then the entire Holy Scripture became clear to me, and heaven itself was opened to me. Now we see this brilliant light very clearly, and we are privileged to enjoy it abundantly.”

### **The nature of faith in the passage**

Coming to our verses in 11:1-3 for this week, we see the author describing a few key elements of faith. First, he writes, **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** Here we see a poetic device used called anaphora, a literary technique used in which sequences of words are repeated in parallel way to give added emphasis. With this he is teaching that,

“Faith is living in a hope that is so real it gives absolute assurance. The promises given to the Old Testament saints were so real to them, because they believed God, and they based their lives on them. All the Old Testament promises related to the future- for many believers, far into the future. But the faithful among God’s people acted as if they were in the present tense. They simply took God at His word and lived on that basis. They were people of faith, and faith gave present assurance and substance to what was yet future.” (Macarthur)

FF Bruce in his commentary on Hebrews writes,

“In Old Testament times... there were many men and women who had nothing but the promises of God to rest upon, without any visible evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled; yet so much did these promises mean to them that they regulated the

whole course of their lives in their light. The promises related to a state of affairs belonging to the future; but these people acted as if that state of affairs were already present, so convinced were they that God could and would fulfill what he had promised. In other words, they were men and women of faith.”

Going further, we see that faith produces **“the conviction of things not seen.”** MacArthur explains,

**“‘Conviction of things not seen’** carries the same truth a bit farther, because it implies a response, an outward manifestation of the inward assurance. The person of faith lives his belief. His life is committed to what his mind and his spirit are convinced is true.

Noah, for example, truly believed God. He could not possibly have embarked on the stupendous, demanding, and humanly ridiculous task God gave him without having absolute faith. When God predicted rain, Noah had no concept of what rain was, because rain did not exist before the Flood. It is possible that Noah did not even know how to construct a boat, much less a gigantic ark. But Noah believed God and acted on His instructions. He had both assurance and conviction-true faith. His outward building of the ark bore out his inward belief that the rain was coming, and that God’s plan was correct for constructing a boat that would float. His faith was based on God’s Word, not on what he could see but on what he had experienced. For 120 years he preached in faith, hoped in faith, and believed in faith.

The natural man cannot comprehend that kind of spiritual faith. We see Him who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27), but the unsaved man does not, because he has no means of perception. Because he has no spiritual senses, he does not believe in God, or the realities of God’s realm. He is like a blind man who refuses to believe there is such a thing as light because he has never seen the light.”

This is because, as the Scriptures reveal, faith is ultimately a supernatural gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Spirit of God must work within man’s mind, heart, and will to bring about genuine faith. From start to finish it is a gift of grace. When Peter first publicly professed his faith in Christ, Jesus told him openly, **“Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood**

**has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 16:17)** This supernatural aspect of faith is what enables believers to triumph and persevere with Christ despite extreme duress. True faith cannot ultimately fail because God is its source, and the Holy Spirit is its guarantee.

### **The testimony of faith in the believer**

Going on in 11:2, the author states that faith is how **“the people of old gained their approval.”** The approval of which he is most certainly speaking, is the divine favor of God. As Brown writes,

“By exercising this kind of faith, the men of old gained that which matters most, the warm commendation of God. These elders (it is the same word used in the opening sentence of the letter) received the Word of God and in different generations made their own response to its message, thus receiving divine approval. Without this kind of faith, man cannot please God nor have the satisfaction of knowing his life has divine favor. For the Christian, pleasing God is of the greatest possible importance. He does not set his heart on gaining human approval; that can be dangerous. He longs that at this present moment he is earning God’s approval and that in the end God will express it.”

For all genuine believers, obtaining divine approval by living a life of gratitude and love should be the goal. They know that one day they will stand before Christ, and they simply want to please Him. Paul reflected this heart when he said, **“Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord-for we walk by faith, not by sight- we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore, we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (I Cor. 5:6-9)**

### **The evidence for faith in the created world**

Finally, in verse 3 we read, **“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.”** The truths contained in the verse above are enormous and have massive ramifications for how the believer processes the world he lives in. Simply put, faith empowers the mind, heart, and will, to believe the creation account found in Genesis 1. As Macarthur says,

“The writer makes an absolutely stupendous claim in this short verse. The greatest claim, and the one hardest for an unbeliever to accept is that understanding of creation comes entirely by faith...The origin of the universe has been a long-standing problem for philosophers and scientists. Centuries of investigation, speculation, and comparing of notes and theories have brought them no closer to a solution. Every time a consensus seems to be developing about a particular theory someone comes up with evidence that disproves it or makes it less plausible.”

It is helpful to keep in mind here John Calvin’s comments about the verse,

“The very appearance of heaven and earth constrains even the ungodly to acknowledge some Maker; and hence Paul condemns all ingratitude, because they did not, after having known God, give him the honor due to him (Rom. 1:25). And no doubt religion would not have so prevailed among all nations, had not men’s minds been impressed with the convictions that God is Creator of the world. It thus then appears that this knowledge which the Apostle ascribes to faith (in Romans 1), exists without faith.

To this I reply, that though there has been an opinion of this kind among heathens, that the world was made by God, it was yet very evanescent, for as soon as they formed a notion of some God, they became instantly vain in their imaginations, so that they groped in the dark, having in their thoughts a mere shadow of some uncertain deity, and not the knowledge of the true God. Besides, as it was only a transient opinion that flit in their minds, it was far from being anything like knowledge. We may further add that they assigned to fortune or chance the supremacy in the government of the world, and they made no mention of God’s providence which alone rules everything. Men’s minds therefore are wholly blind, so that they see not the light of nature which

shines forth in created things, until being irradiated by God's Spirit, they begin to understand by faith what otherwise they cannot comprehend. Hence most correctly does the Apostle ascribe such an understanding to faith; for they who have faith do not entertain a slight opinion as to God being the Creator of the world, but they have a deep conviction fixed in their minds and behold the true God. And further, they understand the power of his word, not only as manifested instantaneously in creating the world, but also as put forth continually in its preservation; nor is it his power only that they understand, but also his goodness, and wisdom, and justice. And hence they are led to worship, love, and honor him.”

These truths run alongside key truths taught about Jesus Christ at the very beginning of Hebrews. In 1:2-3 we read that God working through his Son, Jesus Christ, **“created the world... who is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of His nature, and He upholds the universe by the word of His power.”** True faith compels the believer to allow the Word of God to be his final authority, to submit to its teaching, and ultimately give full assent to Jesus Christ, the One who created the world by his Word and sustains it entirely.

## **Conclusion**

To close, it goes without saying that Hebrews 11 was written not only for the edification of the original Jewish audience, but also for us. As we have learned, deeper faith is what God is always seeking to cultivate in his children, regardless of the time or place they live. It is important to remember that faith is the only means by which we can express our love and devotion to God. Apart from it, we have nothing, but with it we have everything. The prophet Jeremiah lived in the most difficult time of Israel’s history, and yet his faith in God enabled him to triumph (despite many tears!) because by it he learned to rely on God, and trust in His Word. In Jeremiah 17:7-8 the prophet describes the faithful and encourages us with these final words,

**“Thus says the LORD “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind, and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD. For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes but will live in**



stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.”

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