

Lesson 30
What Is Faith?
Hebrews 11:1-3

Today we begin to study one of the most exciting chapters in the whole Bible. This chapter has been called the “Parade of the Heroes of Faith.” Hebrews Chapter 11 is all about faith and today we will attempt to define faith. This is the only definition of faith in the whole Bible. However, faith must be put into the context of the Book of Hebrews and this is not a complete definition of faith.

Let’s not forget that most of these professing Hebrew-Christians to whom the author was writing were doubting their faith in Christ because of the terrible persecution they were experiencing from the unsaved world. They were beginning to waver in their stand for Christ and slacken up in their testimony. The author encourages them not to give up but to push on in the Christian life by patient endurance.

“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Heb. 10:35-36).

They were to push on to prove the reality of true, saving faith in Christ and to demonstrate that they were not apostates.

“But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (Heb. 10:38-39).

Faith, in this context, has to do with endurance or perseverance. This section gives a definition of faith as it relates to future spiritual realities, and is not so much interested in how to get faith as to describe the life of faith and its characteristic, perseverance.

The concept of faith is greatly misunderstood in our day, and there are as many definitions of faith as there are religious people. Perhaps I should explain what faith is not before I try to explain what faith is. Faith is not positive thinking, although there is a positive element to faith. Faith is not a hunch that one follows, although faith does deal with the subjective side of man. Faith is not hoping for the best, although faith expects the best from God. Faith is not optimism, even though faith does make one optimistic. Faith, according to the Bible, is the human response to divine revelation. It is trusting the God who has revealed Himself in Holy Scripture. It is taking God at His word.

The most important thing about faith is not faith itself but the object of that faith. It is not enough to say that one has faith, but he must have faith in the God of Scripture. Faith is not enough, for all religionists have faith - Shintoists, Buddhists, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah

Witnesses and so on, but real saving and sanctifying faith must have as its object Jesus Christ. Sincere but misplaced faith leads down the road to doom.

The Book of Hebrews takes us beyond the initial commitment one has to Christ by faith to the life of faith. True faith endures. Real faith perseveres and faith that does not persevere is not real faith.

DEFINITION OF FAITH - Hebrews 11:1

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for ...” -- The word “assurance” has several different meanings such as “substance, reality, foundation or confidence.” Faith is the means whereby spiritual truths can be a reality to genuine believers. When we first came to Christ in faith, we believed He would give us the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, come again to receive us, grant us redeemed bodies and give us eternal fellowship with Him in heaven. As Christians, we hope for these things, but faith gives us confidence and assurance that these things will come to pass. By faith we are sure of eternal things; by hope we are confident that we shall have them.

Faith makes the promises of God sure and meaningful in the believer’s life. I am not saying that faith makes God’s promises real. Spiritual truth and God’s promises are real whether we believe them or not, but faith gives us assurance and confidence in the spiritual realities we have hoped for. Faith has substance; faith has reality and that reality is the person of God and His promises.

The word “assurance” also has the meaning of “title deed.” Suppose, for example, you owned a piece of property. As the owner you possess a title deed - a legally binding contract, fully notarized which clearly indicates that you are the sole owner of this property. Because you possess this title, you have confidence and assurance that no one will ever take this property from you. Well, our faith is a title deed to spiritual realities and this faith gives us confidence and assurance that no one will ever take our spiritual realities from us. Just as you might plan improvements on your property because you are confident of ownership, so you plan improvements in your life because you are sure that God’s promises are true and your hope is a real one.

Faith gives us assurance that spiritual realities are ours and they will be fully ours at the second advent of Christ. Faith keeps on trusting God in confidence and assurance that things hoped for will be actually ours one day.

Suppose a friend of yours were to come to you -- someone whom you trusted -- and promise to give you a treasure. Suppose he were to say, “I’m going away, I don’t know for sure how long I’ll be away but when I come back, I’ll give you a very wonderful treasure. Until I return, I have a list of things I want you to do. I’ll expect an accounting of your activity to see how well you’ve fulfilled this responsibility. The better you meet the requirements I present, the more you will enjoy the treasure.”

What would you do? Well, one thing you would not do is throw away his instructions. You

would take the instructions home and read and make sure you fully understood them. Then you would begin to study them very carefully, noting how they apply to your life. Day after day you would ask yourself the question, “What if he comes today? Will he be satisfied? Am I keeping his instructions?” And each day you would try harder to do everything the instructions said. Every decision, every act, would be screened by these instructions and by the fact that your benefactor might choose that day to return and demand an accounting.

Did you realize that Christ has promised you a treasure of everlasting life and eternity with your Savior? God has promised you the treasure of everlasting life and eternity with Him if you have trusted in Jesus. Jesus Himself promised to come back personally and take you to His Father. And in the meantime, He has left instructions for you to follow until He returns. These instructions are in the New Testament and form the guidance for every believer’s life. By faith, we are to persevere in keeping these instructions.

“... the conviction of things not seen.” -- Faith also makes the unseen works of God real. Faith brings us present proof of the unseen world. Faith brings inner conviction now of unseen eternal realities in Christ.

Faith makes us aware that we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom and that which is seen is not the whole explanation of life. There are realities which cannot be seen, weighed, measured, analyzed or touched, and yet they are as real and vital as anything we can see. In fact, they are more real because they are the explanation of the things which can be seen. The spiritual world is more real than the physical world about us, and we can only enter into it through faith.

In 2 Kings 6:12-17 Elisha and his attendant were surrounded by the armies of the King of Syria. When the attendant saw the armies, he panicked and said, “What shall we do?” Elisha, knowing the power of the spiritual kingdom, prayed that the Lord would open the attendant’s eyes to see realities of the unseen world. God opened his eyes and by faith he saw the mountains full of chariots of fire, indicating that God had sent his angelic hosts to protect Elisha and his attendant.

Only faith can give us conviction of the spiritual world. **“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”** (Heb. 11:6). It is possible to see God, who is unseen, through faith. In Hebrews 11:27 Moses endured because he knew by faith the unseen God, “as seeing Him who is unseen.” Faith takes God at His word and pushes on, which in turn opens up the realities of the spiritual world. The degree to which a Christian believes God’s promises is the degree to which he will see God and His spiritual kingdom.

Unless we exercise faith in God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ in Scripture, we will never have assurance and confidence and conviction about spiritual realities. When we really believe, we will experience God, but our faith must be in God. We believe our doctor when he tells us what medicine to take; we believe our broker when he tells us what stocks to buy; we believe our advertiser when he tells us what car to purchase, then why don’t we believe our faithful Creator when He tells us of all the eternal realities He has for us in Christ Jesus? Faith goes beyond the seen to the unseen and rests in a faithful God who promises to keep His word.

John Calvin said,

The Spirit of God shows us hidden things, the knowledge of which cannot reach our senses. Eternal life is promised to us, but it is also promised to the dead; we are told of the resurrection of the blessed, but meantime we are involved in corruption; we are declared to be just, and sin dwells within us; we hear that we are blessed, but meantime we are overwhelmed by untold miseries; we are promised an abundance of all good things, but we are often hungry and thirsty; God proclaims that He will come to us immediately, but seems to be deaf to our cries. What would happen to us if we did not rely on our hope, and if our minds did not emerge above the world out of the midst of darkness through the shining Word of God and by His Spirit?

THE EXPLANATION OF FAITH - Hebrews 11:2-3

“For by it the men of old gained approval.” -- The fact that faith has power to see and realize the unseen is proven by the experience of the fathers of the faith in the Old Testament. Their diligent exercise of the faith principle pleased God for God is always pleased when His children exercise true faith in His promises. The Old Testament saints exercised faith and we are to follow their example. ***“... but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises”*** (Heb. 6:12). Each father exercised faith and endured unto the end, proving that faith works and results in action. In short, the Old Testament saints persevered in the Faith.

This is a direct exhortation to the Hebrew-Christians. The Old Testament saints exercised faith and to depart from faith is to depart from the Old Testament saints. Therefore, they must not go back under the legalism of the Mosaic Law but imitate the faith principle of the Jewish fathers.

“By faith we understand that the worlds (ages) were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” -- The word “worlds” should be translated “ages” and it refers to the whole created universe and the periods of time administered by God. Faith alone enables us to perceive that the universe was not made out of preexistent materials but that it owes its existence to the creative word and will of God. Creation is a fact we apprehend by faith, for we know that God exists and His Word tells us He is the Creator. ***“By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host ... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast”*** (Psalm 33:6, 9). In creation, we believe what we have not seen -- we know God created even though we were not there, but God was there. By faith we know that all the promises God has made us are ours, even though we have not seen them all yet.

Not only the created universe is understood by faith but also the time periods or ages of history. By faith we know that God is in control of all human circumstances and circumstances do not fall upon the world by chance. Everything is somehow under God’s control -- evil men, evil acts and evil governments are all somehow fulfilling God’s purposes. These are not mere natural events of history, but we understand that invisible forces are at work directed by the will of God, and the patterns of the ages are according to His design. ***“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to***

His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Faith, then, allows us to come to grips with things unseen. Faith puts us into immediate touch with reality. We cannot be realists until we are exercising faith in God and His promises. The most simple Christian has understanding that the most brilliant natural mind does not have. The wisest men on earth have not been able to discover of themselves what faith understands.

Ray Stedman said,

“Science, for instance, cannot tell me how human history is going to end, but by faith I know. Science cannot tell me what is wrong with human life, what is the reason why I act the way I do, and you act the way you do, but by faith I know. Science cannot tell me what lies beyond the door of death. Even to the scientists it is an enigma, a mystery, but by faith I know what lies beyond. Science cannot explain the mysteries of my own makeup, and tell me how to fulfill my manhood, how to realize my dreams, but faith can.”

CONCLUSION

Without faith it is impossible to please God. By faith a man must believe that he is a corrupted sinner, alienated from God, and headed for judgment just as the Scriptures teach, for this is God’s declaration of the condition of all men outside of Christ. By faith, a person must turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and receive Him as his only Savior for sin and crown Him as King of his life.

Faith in Christ and His finished work for sin is the key that unlocks the door to the infinite spiritual treasures in Christ. Have you trusted in Christ? Have you leaned wholly on Christ to save you? Remember, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him!”