



FAITH

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Charles Spurgeon holds the record for the longest series of sermons in the history of Christianity. He would print up each message he preached, and nobody has an exact number of the sermons, but there were somewhere around 5,000. He started publishing a new volume every year, but he had such a backlog of sermons that there was enough to print another volume each year for 25 years after he died! You know it's a long sermon series when it continues after even the preacher is dead and gone.

Our series out of the book of Hebrews is not nearly that long, but it is the longest single series we've gone through, to date, and it hasn't been through easy concepts. In his efforts to lift up Jesus, the author has taken us into some pretty heady territory, where it takes a lot of work to wrap your mind around the concept being discussed. Jesus' humanity. Jesus' divinity. His role as our high priest. Very important, but also very abstract in many ways.

Today, we come to chapter 11 -- a section of Hebrews that's all about faith -- another potentially philosophical topic. But the writer instead switches gears and teaches us through stories of some of the great heroes of the Bible.

It's a favorite chapter of many people. It's also a long chapter -- longer than we normally tackle in one sitting. But I'm going to read it as a unit, because to catch the flow of where the author is going, you really need to take it all in at once. The chapter is like a gallery of faith with all kinds of things to look at. As I read through it, listen to see if you can keep track of just how many examples the author gives along the way.

Hebrews 11

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age -- and Sarah herself was barren -- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated -- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Remember scratch-and-sniff books? They're always irresistible. Even for adults. You see that little patch on the page and you've just got to know what it smells like. An author could easily describe a strawberry with words and pictures. "Strawberries are red with tiny seeds and a sweet taste." But a scratch and sniff book gives you an entirely different experience of strawberries. You learn something through your nose that no ordinary definition can give you.

Without sounding disrespectful, I would say that chapter 11 is like the scratch and sniff portion of Hebrews. Rather than writing out long definitions of faith, the writer brilliantly uses concrete examples that will capture the imagination of his readers. He gives us an entirely different experience of faith. We can breathe in and catch the essence of it through the lives of other people.

This week on TV I caught an interview with Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House. The reporter asked her about her faith and the role that played in her decision making. Then he made an interesting comment. He said, “You know, faith is turning out to be an important topic in the presidential race this year, but the candidates seem to have difficulty articulating their own faith.”

That’s a very insightful comment. But it’s not just true about politicians. I would say that most of us have difficulty putting faith into words. We know what we feel and believe in our hearts, but it’s hard to translate that into something meaningful for other people.

We also carry around a lot of misconceptions about faith. Here are a few biggies:

Faith equals a super-size imagination

There’s an episode of SpongeBob where SpongeBob and his friend Patrick the starfish are playing inside a big cardboard box. Their friend Squidward hears them, and the sounds coming out of the box are so realistic he can’t believe it. It sounds like a real rocket is blasting off, and then it sounds like a real construction site. Finally, Squidward goes and opens the box, and there’s nothing inside but SpongeBob and Patrick, who inform Squidward that they are using their imagination. Squidward is never able to quite enter into the fun, because he’s too confined to the real world.

Some people view faith as having to try hard to pretend. Believing in God is like believing in the tooth fairy, depending on us to have a childlike heart and give way to our imagination. God becomes something we picture in our mind, and the more faith we have, the better the picture we can come up with.

Faith equals a grocery list

A second misconception is that faith is a check list of beliefs, that faith is agreeing to certain doctrines. You come up with a creed you can sign off on, and that’s your faith. It’s a mental exercise, and then it becomes a way to compare yourself with other people. You can choose your friends or your church based on how closely your lists match.

There’s nothing wrong with thinking through what you believe. Being careful is a good thing, especially when it comes to matters of faith. But the way Hebrews talks about faith is much more dynamic and not something that only happens with your brain. Polls show that a lot of people are Christians on paper and can agree with a particular theology. But faith is more than nodding your head to a list of bullet points about God.

Faith equals devotion

Sometimes we think of faith as being all about a person’s devotion. We talk about somebody’s “deep faith,” meaning they’re very spiritual or religious. What’s important

is demonstrating how strong your personal belief is. As long as you're super sincere and you show real commitment, it doesn't really matter who or what you believe in.

According to Hebrews 11, where you put your faith matters a great deal. This whole conversation flows out of the previous 10 chapters, which were entirely devoted to Jesus and the work he's done. It's not our personal devotion that makes anything real.

Faith equals people better than me.

Many times I have been impressed and humbled by the amount of faith I've seen in others and it makes me go, "I wish I had their faith." And when I see a list of Bible heroes like the one Hebrews just laid out, I can start to feel like, "That was great for them, but I'm no Moses or Abraham. I can never live up to that." Instead of motivating me, their faith can intimidate me, because they seem super human.

But if you look at the list more closely, you see a bunch of flawed men and women. Abraham was a liar. Moses was a murderer. Noah got drunk. You've got everything in that list: Prostitutes. Adulterers. Doubters. Bad parents. People with anger issues and arrogance and deception in their hearts. The list of sins is pretty comprehensive. Taken together, they don't represent some uniquely holy and extra spiritual brand of people. They're completely ordinary with all the problems the rest of us have. If faith was available to them, it's available to me and you as well. Faith is not a mark of extreme Christians – it's normal for all Christians.

Those are some of the misconceptions we live with about faith. What do we replace them with? I said before that the writer of Hebrews isn't interested in giving us an ironclad book definition of faith in this chapter, but he does start off with a description that's extremely helpful for reshaping how we think about faith. Let's look at the first verse again:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

To me, that's a somewhat surprising sentence. I don't think I would have described faith as being sure. I would have said faith is trusting or believing. But the author of Hebrews goes to something different. Essentially, he says that

Faith is a three-legged stool.

In other words, faith is something that will support us. Some farmers may be able to sit and milk a cow on a one-legged stool, but I could never feel safe perched on that thing. And even there, they are relying on their own two legs for balance. I want to know when I sit down that I'm not going to tip over. You don't need a physics degree to learn that it really takes three legs on a stool or a table or a camera tripod to have a solid footing. Anything less than that won't be adequate.

Hebrews tells us that faith is something solid. The word that's translated here as "being sure" was translated a little differently in the old King James Bibles. There it said this:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

That does a bit better job of capturing the essence of the Greek. The word for "being sure" or "substance" is typically used as a noun. It changes the concept a bit if we think of faith as a thing. Now it becomes the tangible proof of what we're hoping for.

Does that make sense? When I say faith is "being sure", I feel a pressure inside to try to be sure, to have more confidence. When I say faith is the substance of what I hope for, that means faith is already defined and solid and I can rest on it without worrying.

I want that kind of faith. That sounds more like the kind of faith that will sustain me and get me through the rough times. Faith is no longer just a gut feeling that this must be true. It's grounded and bolted to the floor.

What is it in our faith that would allow us to speak that confidently about it? My feelings about God aren't the basis for my faith. They come and go. I can be passionate one minute and completely bored the next. My own ethics or morality aren't what supports my faith. They're not reliable either. Even being born into a Christian family doesn't translate into a backbone for your faith. Those are all good, but not good enough to say they make me sure of what's hoped for.

I said faith is a three legged stool, so here are the three legs, the three undeniably firm supports we can count on:

First, we have **the character of God the Father**. A few weeks ago we looked at this verse:

Hebrews 6:18

...it is impossible for God to lie...

God has made tremendous promises to us, promises that he will forgive us, promises that we'll find him when we seek him, promises that he will never leave us, promises that pain will one day end. Our faith in those promises stands on the truth that God never breaks a promise. His character ensures that he never lies. We can take that one to the bank. When we claim his promises, we're not just being optimistic or hoping for the best – we're counting on who he is to hold up.

Secondly, we have **the work of God the Son**. The death and resurrection of Jesus happened in history. They are recorded events. We have more historical evidence for the life of Jesus than we do for Julius Caesar. His presence on earth grounds our faith in human experience – not a myth or legend or idea. Every person he touched, every miracle he performed, every word he taught, every agony he endured – each of those was a moment in real time.

I was driving in my car a couple days ago, and I flipped on the radio. One of the local talk shows was interviewing a former follower of Ramtha. Do you remember JZ Knight's cult down in Yelm? Apparently, it's still going strong. Anyway, this former follower was exposing the deception and lack of anything to back up JZ's claims. Then the host tried to equate people putting too much faith in Ramtha to people putting too much faith in Christ. I wanted to take my radio out and shake it and yell "There is no comparison!" Christianity is not blind faith. We're talking about a person who actually existed and walked the planet

My thoughts about Jesus can change over time. But the raw material of faith is not my opinion or my interpretation. It's the wonderful truth that the Son of God entered time and space, lived, died and rose again. We can go back to those fundamental facts when our own feelings won't hold us up.

The third leg of the stool is **the presence of God the Holy Spirit.**

2 Corinthians 5:5

Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

If I were left on my own, my faith would never amount to anything. But I'm not on my own, and that makes all the difference. The Bible says that when we take the step of putting our trust in Christ, his Spirit moves into our hearts. That is a spiritual reality that we often forget. It's not just me praying – it's his Spirit praying with me and through me. His Spirit gives me strength to believe and have faith, and according to Paul – his Spirit guarantees what's coming. That's a truth that will hold our weight.

Faith is the substance, the assurance of things hoped for. Thanks to the character of the Father, the work of the Son and the presence of the Spirit, we are on firm ground. Faith is a three legged stool.

That first verse of chapter 11 also tells me that

Faith is a resistance movement.

During World War II, Germany occupied France. All outward appearances made it look like the Nazis were in charge. But the French underground refused to give up. Small bands of men and women kept fighting and are credited with preventing the Germans from crossing the English channel.

They embodied a characteristic of faith that is sometimes overlooked, and that is the defiant side of it. It's not defiance against God – faith is defiance of this world and Satan who has this world in his clutches. Why do I say that? Because faith is a refusal to be defined by the present.

Our verse said faith is being sure of what's hoped for. If we're hoping for something, it's still ahead of us. Faith is future-minded.

I saw that this week at Paul Lewand's funeral. Death has such a finality to it. Grief and loss can crash over you like a wave and pin you to the ground. But I listened as Karen and Ray and their brothers all pointed to their dad's faith, and how they knew death was not the end for him. They had a confidence in what they hope for – that their dad is now with Jesus, and that they will join him there someday.

That's resistance. That's faith. Standing up and speaking to a reality you can't entirely see, but knowing that it's real just the same.

Everything about life screams for us to live as if this moment is all we've got. Circumstances make it look ridiculous to think otherwise. I really like the words in an old Indigo Girls song:

*My place is of the sun, this place is of the dark.
I do not feel the romance, I do not catch the spark.
By grace the sun is growing stronger
And I will not be a pawn for the prince of darkness any longer.*

Dr. Hanna Massad is the pastor of Gaza Baptist Church - the only evangelical church in the Gaza Strip. His wife, Suhad, runs the Palestinian Bible Society Bookstore. They are located right in the center of many terrorist organizations and have faced every difficulty imaginable. Earlier this month, a member of their church was killed for his faith, right in front of the bookstore.

The odds against a church in that spot are incredible. Dr. Massad writes this, "The last few days have been very difficult for me, where I felt the spirit of fear and desperation. But yesterday and today, I felt more of the presence of God in the midst of darkness. I need more and more of His presence and power in order to minister to my people the message of hope and peace. We have only one way. We chose to live for Him and reflect his love to the Palestinian people."

That's resistance. That's faith. Faith raises its hand and says "Enough. I will not live this lie. I will not give up on hope. No matter how much you try to tell me otherwise, I know my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth." That's God's truth, and faith clings to it in the face of all that denies it.

Faith is resistance, but I also said it's a resistance movement. I meant movement in two different ways. First, **it is a group effort**. Movements are about large numbers of people headed toward the same goal. So often we think of faith in individual terms. It's private. What I really like about this chapter is how it corrects that perception.

The author begins with creation and carries right through to his own present day. He's not telling many stories – he's telling one story and his readers are a part of it. He says that Abel is still speaking today. He says

God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

We are interconnected with the people of God. This is why when our faith needs encouraging, we can find strength in the stories of God's people throughout history. That's why there is such a need for us to be provocative like Christopher said last week. There aren't any mavericks or lone riders in Christianity. We're in this thing together.

The second way faith is a movement is that **it involves moving**. There's a common thread moving through all the lives we see in this chapter. All their faith was visible in their actions. Nowhere do we see a statement about someone just believing without it affecting their choices. Abel made an offering. Rahab hid spies. Noah built a boat. And Abraham gives us the clearest metaphor by physically moving out in faith to an unknown country.

What is God asking you to move this morning? Faith always translates into action. If you want to grow in your faith, if you feel like you don't have enough, try focusing on obedience. Faith grows and thrives on obedience. Listen and step out. Give up the familiar, give up the comfortable, give up the sinful and go. God will meet you in the going, because faith is movement.

Finally, **faith is an unfinished book**.

We assume more faith will mean more answers to prayer. If I'm believing the way I should, then I think I should get better results. Yet most of the time, even the most faith-filled of us don't find our problems resolved.

I heard a tragic story the other day of a young teenage girl who was assaulted and held captive at her job for hours while her manager did nothing to stop it. And she said afterwards, "I lost my faith that night, because I prayed and prayed for God to help and he didn't."

What do you say to such a person? How do you respond when faith goes unanswered? What's the point of trusting in God if he's not going to help in our time of need?

There's no easy, satisfying response this side of heaven. Sometimes, when you see what a friend is going through, the only fitting thing to do is what Job's friends did, sit down in dust and ashes and weep with them.

But God gave us this list of people in chapter 11 who also went through it. What did he want us to take from it? After reading through the full list of people and their accomplishments, the author says this:

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.

These people had faith in spite of being treated horrifically. They had faith in spite of suffering. They all died still waiting to see the day God would fulfill his promises of justice and salvation.

We now live in light of the cross, which is where God entered into our waiting, our anguish and experienced it firsthand. That's an enormous source of comfort when you think about it. But at the same time, we share in common with the rest of God's people the cry "How long, O Lord?" We're not alone.

But more than showing us we're not alone, the faith of these people shows us this: The reason for faith is not because it will result in God's blessing. We have faith because he's God. He's the only one worthy of our faith. These people demonstrate the strength that is available to us when we throw in our lot with Christ.

Isaiah 50:10

*Let him who walks in the dark,
who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.*

Given the long string of examples, suffering and walking in the dark shouldn't take us by surprise. We live in a broken, sinful place among broken, sinful people. Jesus himself said, "In this world you will have trouble." But he didn't end there. He said, "But take courage – I have overcome the world." Even though it looks grim now, the outcome is already determined.

The good news is that faith says, this isn't the only world. Someday the book WILL be finished. We can be certain of what we do not see. Believers through the centuries have all learned the same thing: a delayed answer is different than no answer. Christians have always clung to the fact that God will in fact deal with evil one day, that he HAS dealt with it, and that one day we will see the wrongs righted and justice.

There is an unbroken chain of people clear back to the creation of the world, all believing the same thing, all stepping out in obedience, all calling us to follow their example. Ask yourself:

What will resistance look like for me? What seems so overpoweringly real and forceful that I have trouble getting past it? What makes it difficult for me to think of a bigger reality?

What move can I make today? Faith is action. Faith grows and thrives on obedience. What's the step God asks me to take right now?

As you think about those questions, I want to wrap up this morning with a short slide show. It's a contemporary extension of chapter 11, because it adds to the gallery. It tells of more saints who have held on to faith as they walked through the fire. And as the writer of Hebrews put it, the world was not worthy of them. The story of faith continues, and we're invited to get caught up in it.