

## By Faith

### **Hebrews 11:1-11**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I don't know about you, but for some reason, when I hear this Scripture, it makes me want to take a deep breath and just relax. Something about it is pleasant and comforting. But the more you think about it, the more you dig into what we read this morning, the more complicated it gets.

Pastor Roger L. Ray points out that this phrase from Scripture is actually a paradox. After all, we are not at all assured of the things we hope for. We don't hope for things that are assured. I don't hope the sun will rise tomorrow, because I know it's going to happen. And even more today than when Hebrews was written, we are not convinced of things we can't or haven't seen. And because of this paradox, Ray says, we are in danger of a couple misunderstandings about faith.

First, we are in danger of thinking of faith as some kind of magic which makes us able to believe silly stuff which clearly is not true. Your grandpa's buddies want you to join them on a snipe hunt. How do you know snipe exist? Well, you just have to take it on faith. Faith is not meant to be an excuse for ignorance. Faith doesn't mean we turn off our brains and stop thinking. The second danger, Ray says, is tying faith to evidence. There are no shortage of books

that try to prove God's existence beyond all possible doubt. Some of these are well-written and persuasive. Others rely on faulty logic and misleading scientific claims to try to prove God.

Both of these misunderstandings come about when we try to tie faith to a mental exercise. When we make faith appeal to our minds. On the one hand, assassinating our brains and trying to believe in spite of evidence against faith, and on the other hand trying to use pseudo-scientific evidence to chase away all doubt about God. But these are misunderstandings. This is not what the writer of Hebrews is trying to teach us. In fact, just the opposite. The author here is trying to demonstrate that faith is not about the mind, but about action.

You see, there's a difference between 'belief that' and 'belief in.' If you have a big presentation coming up, you might turn to your partner or a friend and ask, "Do you believe in me?" looking for some kind of affirmation. You are not looking to get a response like, "Yeah, I believe that you exist." 'Belief that' is about the mind. Can you wrap your mind around something being true or real. 'Belief in' requires a level of trust, commitment, and action.

Faith, for the author of Hebrews, was about action. After that famous opening line, we then get 18 sentences that start with the words, "by faith." And each of these are examples of how our spiritual ancestors have lived out their faith. No creeds; no statements about what they thought. Just stories about how they put their faith into action in their daily lives. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham... the text goes on beyond what we read this morning. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites as a whole people, Rahab, and a whole list of prophets. All these people acted out their faith.

You know, we've had too many funerals in our church this year. And at each one of them, I was amazed to learn new things about the person we were remembering. And not just things about their childhood, or what they did as a job. But how they lived out their faith. And I

know that I was not the only one present who didn't know some of the faith actions that were shared. After Steve's funeral, someone came up to me and said, "I wish I had known all of this about him while he was still alive." Even today, among us, people are acting on faith in incredible ways – that we often don't know about at all.

And why don't we know? Well, I wonder if it's in part because of how we are as a society in general. All too frequently in the news, there's another politician or sports figure who has messed up. Illegal gambling, extra-marital affairs, drug addiction, you name it. We are quick to shine a light on people who have failed. But how often do we lift up those who are behaving in exemplary ways? Not often enough, so it becomes easy to be blinded to the ways people live out their faith.

Faith, for the author of Hebrews, was not about the mind. It was about action. But not just our action. It was also about God's action in the world. In the stories of faith listed in Hebrews, many of our spiritual ancestors didn't live to see God's promises unfold completely. Noah was saved in the flood, but let's face it. When he died he didn't know for sure whether God would ever send another destroying flood. Abraham was the first person God told about the Promised Land. But neither Abraham nor Moses would ever settle there. Looking back today, however, we see that God was faithful. That God is faithful. God's promises sometimes take a long time to be fulfilled. But God does what he says he will do.

We, however, like to be able to see the end result. We want the promise to come to fruition in our lifetime. And who can blame us? And if we can't see the promised result, we at least want to see evidence of God's action. We want to see that God is moving things in that direction. And when we don't see God acting, we often wonder where God is. We start to ask if God is paying attention, or if God cares, or if God even exists.

Pastor C. Edward Bowen says that having faith in a God that works with these long time spans is kind of like falling in love with a butterfly. He says, “We know that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But for some reason, God isn’t a big fan of straight lines. God does get us from point A to point B, but sometimes it’s by way of a route that we would have never imagined.”

Okay. So faith isn’t belief that any impossible thing can happen. But neither is faith absolute evidence that something can happen either. Faith is action; faith is how we live out our lives. Faith is the trust that God has fulfilled promises in the past and will continue to do so. But if that’s what faith is, how do we get it?

There’s a great example of this in the final book of the Harry Potter series. In book seven, *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry goes through a crisis of faith. Not faith in God, but faith in Professor Dumbledore, the man who has been both mentor and father-figure. A newly printed biography, authored by a woman of questionable morals and dubious sources, casts Harry’s hero in a very negative light. Harry struggles to resolve what he thought he knew about Dumbledore with what he thinks he now knows.

At a wedding reception, Harry speaks with a woman who believes every word of the biography, then speaks with a man who was friends with Dumbledore since they were children. Harry admits his doubt to this friend, a man named Doge. Let me read from the book.

*“Don’t believe a word of [the biography]!” said Doge at once. “Not a word, Harry! Let nothing tarnish your memories of Albus Dumbledore!”*

*Harry looked into Doge’s earnest, pained face and felt, not reassured, but frustrated. Did Doge really think it was that easy, that Harry could simply choose not to believe? Didn’t Doge understand Harry’s need to be sure, to know everything?*

*Later, still plagued with doubt, Harry speaks to his own friend Hermione. She says, “But you know how much truth there was in everything Rita wrote about you! Doge is right, how can you let these people tarnish your memories of Dumbledore?”*

*He looked away, trying not to betray the resentment he felt. There it was again: Choose*

*what to believe. He wanted the truth. Why was everybody so determined that he should not get it?*

It takes Harry quite a long time in the book to figure out his dilemma. Because he makes belief a mental exercise. He tries to think his way out of the situation. When he sets aside the concept of making a choice, Harry gets on with the business of living. He sets out to complete the task Dumbledore had given him. And as Harry acts, he stumbles his way back into faith. The same is true for us in learning to have faith and trust in God. Pastor Ray says:

I am deeply invested in the academic study of scripture and religion but I would never attempt to teach a person into having faith. The only way to discover the validity of the Christian faith is to make the leap into living the Christian faith. The only evidence for the truth of our faith is the conviction that grows from acting on our faith. The substance of faith is in action. There is no certainty of faith until you have worked with God.

As long as we make faith mental, we struggle. We waver between a faith that is silly and unfounded and a faith that demands evidence. But every once in a while something positive happens in our faith, something special that restores our conviction, strengthens our hearts, and reminds us why we believe what we believe. And more often than not, that something happens while we are at work in the world. When we are living out our faith.

Remember the great baseball movie *Field of Dreams*? This might sound kind of like that line, "If you build it, he will come." If you act, you will find faith. It's similar, but not exactly the same thing. It's more like, "He will come, so you should build it." In other words, God is there. And God is faithful. So you should go ahead and act as if God will fulfill his promises and answer prayers. Because it may not happen when you want or how you expect, but our God is trustworthy and faithful. Amen and amen.