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Sermon Summary #31

What is Faith? Hebrews 11:1-7

Before we so much as stick our big toe into the deep waters of Hebrews 11, I want to make two things crystal clear. The first has to do with the nature and meaning of Christian faith. The second relates to the place of Hebrews 11 in the context of the book of Hebrews as a whole.

So, let me be perfectly clear about the nature and meaning of Christian faith.

- Faith is not believing in your heart what your mind otherwise tells you isn't true.
- Faith is not trusting in something for which there are no facts.
- Faith is not an existential blind leap into the dark.
- Faith is not putting your trust in something or someone about whom you know nothing.
- Faith is not the opposite of knowledge.
- Faith is not the enemy of reason.
- Faith is not the antithesis of scientific endeavor.
- Faith is not believing in something that runs counter to obvious and incontrovertible evidence.
- Faith is not superstition.
- Faith is not a positive mental attitude.
- Faith is not wishful thinking.
- Faith is not a creative power that brings into existence things that otherwise wouldn't exist.
- Faith is not a weapon through which we get God to do things for us that he otherwise wouldn't do.

Faith is warranted confidence and justified trust. So, yes, faith is a subjective experience of the human soul. It is the human soul trusting and expressing confidence in something or in someone. But this confidence is "*warranted*", which is to say there are good grounds for it. To say that we have "*warrant*" for something we believe or that our trust is "*justified*" is to say that there are rock solid facts that make our believing a wise and reasonable thing to do.

So faith is not a baseless and blind leap into the darkness of uncertainty. Faith is a well-grounded, warranted, justified confidence and trust in some truth claim or in some person. More on this later as we make our way through chapter eleven.

Now for my second observation concerning *the place of Hebrews 11 in the context of Hebrews as a whole*. Contrary to how some have approached this chapter, it is not a "stand alone" treatise on the nature of faith. It is embedded within the overall argument and purpose of Hebrews. It would be a travesty for someone to extract Hebrews 11 from the book in which it is found and preach it or teach it as if it were unrelated to what has gone before in Hebrews and what follows.

We know that the people to whom this letter was written were under great pressure because of their faith. They were being tempted to revert back to the old covenant of Moses. Persecution had led some of them to think that it would be safer if they jettisoned Christianity and returned to the ways of Judaism as outlined in the Old Testament. Our author, therefore, labors to persuade them of the superiority of Jesus Christ to all that has come before him. He is the fulfillment of all Old Testament promises and symbols and prophecies and types. He is, in a word, *better!*

It may help to see what might be called the "*bookends*" of Hebrews 11. Just a few verses earlier in Hebrews 10:36 our author told them that they had "need of *endurance*" (Heb. 10:36). They needed to persevere and endure and

press into the promises of God. And then immediately following Hebrews 11, in Hebrews 12:1, he exhorts them to “run with *endurance* the race that is set before” them. So here we find Hebrews 11, tucked in between this call for endurance in chapter ten and then again in chapter twelve. My point is simply that ***the examples of faith that we find in Hebrews 11 are all designed to encourage these first-century professing Christians to hold on tightly to Christ, to persevere in their confidence in him, to endure by clinging to him and all the blessings that God has given us in his Son.***

Another example of this is found back in Hebrews 6:12. There he urged them not to be “sluggish” but rather “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherited the promises” (6:12). In other words, overcome your sinful tendency to become slothful and lazy and reckless and irresponsible by looking to the way in which other believers trusted in God’s word and thus inherited the promises given to them.

You need to recognize what *a brilliant theological and spiritual strategy* this is. The men and women to whom Hebrews is written were contemplating going back to the religious ways of people like Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Moses and Joshua and Gideon and David (the very people of whom Hebrews 11 speaks). So what does our author do? He describes these Old Testament saints as people who lived in daily confidence and faith in the promise of God that something better was coming. That is to say, ***these great men and women of old lived in confident faith and expectation of the coming of the Savior from whom these first-century believers were tempted to walk away!***

It’s as if he says: “I realize you people have suffered greatly. I realize that reverting back to the safe haven of Old Testament Judaism feels powerfully appealing. But let me remind you that *the very people whom you admire most, those great patriarchs and saints of the old covenant, were themselves living every day in joyful and faithful expectation of the fulfillment of God’s promises and the coming of the Messiah, the very one you are thinking of abandoning!* So look to their example and witness. Hold fast to your confidence in Christ no matter what happens, even if the authorities break in and steal your property, even if your friends betray you and mock you, even if it becomes evident that life could be so much easier and safer and more comfortable if you would just turn your back on Jesus.”

That is the sort or kind or quality of people that we must become: people in whose hearts Jesus is known and experienced as so much better, so much more beautiful and precious and satisfying and glorious, that we are willing to suffer whatever may come and do so with endurance and perseverance in our faith in all that God has promised to be for us in him.

That’s what chapter 11 is designed to accomplish in our lives. ***It is meant to solidify and intensify our confidence in God’s word so that we turn from the passing pleasures of sin and live lives of radical, unashamed, passionate love and sacrifice that flows from a faith rooted and riveted in the promises of God in Jesus Christ.***

So, we are now ready to dive into the depths of Hebrews 11. The chapter falls into two parts. First, in vv. 1-3 we find a description or definition of faith. Second, in the remaining verses of the chapter, verses 4-40, we read about a variety of men and women who displayed faith and confidence in the promises of God. A close look at Hebrews 11:4-40 reveals that our author covers *four historical periods*.

(1) In **vv. 4-7** he describes people in what is known as the antediluvian period, or that time in history preceding the great flood. He mentions Abel, Enoch and Noah. (2) In **vv. 8-22** he describes the pre-Mosaic period or what is also known as the age of the Patriarchs. Here we read about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. (3) In **vv. 23-29** it is the faith of Moses himself that becomes the center of attention. (4) Finally, in **vv. 30-40** he mentions a number of people in the post-Mosaic period.

What is Faith? (vv. 1-3)

So we begin with this widely famous portrayal of faith in vv. 1-3 (the word “faith” appears 24x in this chapter alone!).

As you know, there are a variety of differing translations of v. 1. The old King James Version renders it: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The NIV says: “Faith is being sure of what we

hope for.” According to the Phillips translation, “Faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for.” As you can see, the ESV uses the words “assurance” and “conviction”. Believe it or not, I think the KJV rendering is more accurate!

But what could it possibly mean to say that faith is the “substance” and “evidence” of the things for which we hope, the things we have not yet seen? I think it means that genuine faith is more than merely a subjective confidence about what will happen in the future. Make no mistake: it is surely that. Faith is the internal assurance we experience that what is hoped for will in fact come to pass. Faith is our reliance on God to do what he has said he will do even when present circumstances suggest otherwise.

But here I think he’s saying that in a certain sense *faith is also what makes it possible for us now, in the present, to actually experience something of the “substance” of what we know will come only in its fullness at some point in the future.* This is just another way of talking about the “already” and “not yet” dimensions of Christian experience. There is much that is “not yet” ours. We await it. It will come when Christ returns. But there is also a part of that future inheritance that is “already” ours, and faith is what makes it possible for us to experience and enjoy today what will come in fullness only when Christ returns.

So, it is by “faith” that we apprehend or take hold of the goodness and joy of what God promises will one day be ours in their fullness. *There is a sense in which that future promise is already and substantially here when we trust God’s word. Faith gives to our future inheritance a present reality and power, as if it is already possessed.* No one has expressed this with greater clarity than John Piper:

“In other words, faith grasps - lays hold of - God's preciousness so firmly that in the faith itself there is the substance of the goodness and the sweetness promised. Faith doesn't create what we hope for - that would be a mere mind game. Faith is a spiritual apprehending or perceiving or tasting or sensing of the beauty and sweetness and preciousness and goodness of what God promises - especially his own fellowship, and the enjoyment of his own presence.

Faith does not just feel confident that this is coming some day. Faith has spiritually laid hold of and perceived and tasted that it is real. And this means that faith has the substance or the nature of what is hoped for in it. Faith's enjoyment of the promise is a kind of substantial down payment of the reality coming” (sermon, *What Faith Knows and Hopes For*, June 1, 1997; www.desiringgod.org).

Thus we see that there is a “now” and a “not yet” to the gospel. Faith enables us to lay hold of it “now”, but the time has “not yet” come when we will experience its fullness. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, faith is that sturdy bridge which provides a link, a bond of union, as it were, between our present experience and the blessings God has stored up for us in the age to come.

Before leaving this definition or description of faith, our author gives us one illustration of how it works. No one was present when the only thing that existed was God. We couldn’t hear him speak the universe into being. But the very nature of creation itself testifies to the existence of its Creator. We see the fingerprints of God all over the material world. As Paul said in Romans 1:19-20,

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:19-20a).

The point of the apostle Paul is that the “evidence” that God created the world out of nothing by the word of his power is in the things made. The stuff of our material world points to a Sovereign Creator. And faith is the spiritual seeing or perceiving of God’s powerful creative presence in things he made.

The Faith of the Ante-Diluvians (vv. 4-7)

Our author then turns to give us a few examples of this sort of “faith” in the experience of three men who lived before the great flood of Noah.

But before we look at any of the individuals mentioned in Hebrews 11, it's important to remember that *it isn't only Old Testament saints to whom we should look to be inspired and encouraged*. I'm getting ahead of myself, but in Hebrews 13:7 we read this exhortation:

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and *imitate their faith*” (Heb. 13:7).

So you don't have to look only to past heroes of the Old Testament. You can look into more recent history and even to those who are your contemporaries. I have numerous heroes of faith from church history, primarily Jonathan Edwards, puritan pastor and theologian of the 18th century. Church history is not just for intellectual stimulation. *It is there for you to discover godly men and women whose lives of faith can encourage your own. Study their faith and be energized by them. Imitate them.*

One caution: don't ever think that these people are extraordinary, perhaps spiritual super-heroes of some sort whose lives are so beyond ours in terms of obedience and love and faith that all we can do is admire them from a distance. What we are reading about in Hebrews 11 is not only what God *expects* from all of us but *what he has promised to more than abundantly supply in us*. This is ordinary Christian living. You and I, regardless of how much we may struggle, can live in the power of this sort of faith no less so than they did. God has made sufficient provision of his power that whatever is required to walk “with him” in faith is available for the taking.

Now, before we look briefly at these first three men of faith, we need to jump down to v. 6. There we see that *faith pleases God*. Why? Part of the answer has to be because faith looks away from self and to the Savior. Faith is an act of self-renunciation and a declaration that our hope and confidence are in God. Faith puts no trust in man but in God only. It declares that he is enough; he is sufficient; he is able. And it pleases God when he sees his children making known by the way they live that he is altogether glorious and abundant and worthy of their trust.

So don't ever think that merely obeying the commands of Scripture pleases God. External conformity to the revealed will of God, without faith, does not please him. Only obedience that is fueled and energized and sustained by loving confidence and joyful trust in God brings pleasure to our heavenly Father.

The reason it's important to take note of this statement that “without faith it is impossible to please God” is because *in none of the three stories noted here is faith ever mentioned*. All that is said in the stories of Abel, Enoch, and Noah is that they “pleased” God. That is how we know they had great faith.

And there are two things in particular that please God when we have faith in him: our belief that *he is* and our belief that *he rewards* those who seek him. Or, to put it in other words, God is pleased when we believe that he is *real* and that he is a *rewarder*.

God is real. God exists. He exists absolutely and independently of anything or anyone else. The source of his life is within himself, and he exists eternally. He loves it, he likes it, that is to say, he is pleased when you and I reflect in how we live a robust confidence that he is.

But he also loves it when we live in such a way that it draws attention to the fact that God rewards those who seek him. To please God you must believe that *no one seeks him in vain!* He is merciful and gracious and giving to all who come to him. Thus, God not only exists, he exists as the only being who is self-sufficient and abundant and overflowing with good things. He doesn't need us, as if he would be deficient or in some way lacking if we withdrew our obedience and praise. God exists to bless us and to give to us all we need. God is pleased when our seeking of him and our serving him reflect the truth that he is the Giver and we are the Getters.

Do you see how this affects your attitude toward worship on a Sunday morning, as well as the way you listen when God's Word is preached and applied? You must come to God hungry for him, seeking the reward that he offers to those who trust him, and that reward is himself! God is the all-satisfying treasure we seek. “Therefore, worship that pleases God is the hedonistic pursuit of God. He is our exceeding great reward!” (Piper, *Desiring God*, 102).

Three Men of Faith

(1) The example of Abel – Abel, of course, was the second son of Adam and Eve. Their first-born son was Cain. It was because of his “faith” that the sacrifice Abel offered to God was deemed “more acceptable” than the one offered by Cain. Listen carefully: Abel wasn’t approved because of his offering. Rather, his offering was approved and deemed acceptable because of Abel, in particular because Abel offered it in faith and not in some vain attempt to earn God’s favor.

But how does Abel “still speak” to us today? I think he means that his example of faith in the God who exists and rewards those who seek him continues to speak to us of how one pleases God: by believing him, by trusting his promises, by investing all one’s confidence in God alone.

(2) The example of Enoch – Enoch was the seventh generation after Adam. He had numerous brothers and sisters (Gen. 5:19), but none of them experienced the blessing of being translated into the presence of God without having first to die physically. By the way, Enoch was the father of Methuselah, the man who lived to the ripe old age of 969!

Of Enoch it is said in Genesis 5:24 – “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” It’s fascinating to read Genesis 5 where Moses lists for us what he calls “the book of the generations of Adam.” After each person named, the verse closes with the somber statement: **“and he died.”** In the six generations preceding Enoch we read the same somber refrain: “and he died.” Then we come to Enoch and read this: “When Enoch had lived 65 years he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God **and he was not, for God took him**” (Gen. 5:21-24). The narrative picks up with v. 25 and the refrain resumes: “and he died.”

But there is nothing in the OT text about Enoch that says anything about his faith. But we know he had faith because he **“walked with God.”** That’s what faith is: communing with God, speaking with God, loving God, God being present to encourage and love and enjoy, living each moment and making each decision as if God were immediately and tangibly present. That’s faith! And that is why Enoch pleased God.

Once again, don’t overlook how our author is making his point. He isn’t arguing for the nature of faith from what we read of these men in the OT. Faith is never explicitly mentioned in the OT passages that describe them. ***Rather, he sees faith in their lives not because the word itself is mentioned but because these men pleased God, and there is no other way to please God than through faith!***

(3) The example of Noah – Just so you know from the start, I will not be appealing by way of illustration to that horrid movie that recently slithered its way onto film a few months ago. Let me simply say that I have never witnessed a worse distortion of the biblical story than what I saw in the film *Noah*. Although the current movie, *Exodus*, also has elements that deviate from the biblical text, it is worthy of an Oscar in comparison with the pathetic, stupid, idiotic film, *Noah*. Is my opinion coming through loud and clear? I hope so.

It was in his building of the Ark that Noah’s faith was seen. We know this not because the word “faith” is mentioned in the story of Noah. It isn’t. We know it because Noah’s obedience pleased God and the text tells us that you can’t please God without faith.

What Noah undertook must have appeared utterly ludicrous to his neighbors. They all lived inland. It’s entirely possible that none of them had ever seen anything resembling a flood or a ship! But that didn’t matter to Noah. God had spoken and he believed his promise.

Conclusion

Today is January 4, 2015. We stand on the edge of a new year. And some of you are battling a crisis in your faith right now. You don’t know what to believe. You don’t whom to believe. You don’t know how to believe. Your faith is weak and faltering and on the verge of failing. What are you to do?

Remember Paul's words: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The "word of Christ" is the word about Christ, as we have been seeing and reading and hearing all through Hebrews and even during this most recent season of Advent. If you need more faith, the solution is to see more of Christ, to hear more of Christ, to taste and savor more of Christ! So, study him. Reflect on him. Know him.

And here is what God wants you to believe and trust:

That Jesus Christ really is better (not just better than the OT religious way of life, but better than everything in our modern society with all its promises of pleasure and wealth and power and fame).

That everything God is for us in Jesus is enough (you don't need to supplement your faith with worldly additives and human props).

That God will never leave you or forsake you, no matter how painful and confusing your present circumstances may be.

That no trial or trouble or setback can thwart God's determination to make you over into the image of his Son.

That every promise about your eternal future is more rock solid than Gibraltar.

That no matter what 2015 may hold for you, God has your life safely in his hands and you can trust him to do with it what is best for you and for his glory.