

Living by Faith: Defined¹

Hebrews 11:1-3

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Over the next several weeks we are going to be turning our attention to the book of Hebrews and specifically the famous “faith chapter” in it – Chapter 11. If you brought a Bible, or have one on your phone or you see one in the pew in front of you (hopefully I’ve included everyone) I encourage you to open it up now to Hebrews chapter 11. Don’t take my word for this, you need to follow along.

I’ve been looking forward to preaching through this chapter for some time – in fact I plan my sermon series out about a year in advance – and so I didn’t coordinate this to be the series following the tragic shaking our church has experienced over the last few weeks. But it is, and I am once again struck by how God ordains things to come about. This chapter seeks to answer the question “what does it mean to live by faith in the midst of uncertainty?” And I think there is probably no better place we could turn at a time like this.

Would you pray with me as we get started?

[Pray]

Now since we are going to spend several weeks here I want to establish three points of context as we get started. The first point I want to make is one of authorship – who wrote the book of Hebrews. Now this might not sound all that important to you, but you need to know that in the early church along with truthfulness – everything written had to be true, faithfulness to the rest of Scripture and acceptance by all the churches, authorship was one of the most important things. And it was important because the church realized very quickly that some of the letters that were being passed around among their communities were important enough to be preserved as God’s word to the church.

They realized that they were compiling Scripture.² And so they wanted to make sure that the letters they were keeping were telling them the right things. And so everything that was going to be accepted as Scripture had to pass the authorship test – it had to be written by one of the 12 Apostles, or by someone who had spent direct time with one of the 12 Apostles. Only these people were seen as having the authority to write things worthy of being the words of God.

¹ Outline for sermon adapted from John Piper sermon “What Faith Knows and Hopes For”

² 2 Peter 3:16 – Peter recognized Paul’s writings were Scripture.

But when it came to the book of Hebrews something unique happened. While it was recognized very quickly that the content of Hebrews was excellent, bringing to clear light how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament, it was the only book being considered for inclusion in the New Testament that didn't have a clearly identified author. From very early on no one knew who wrote this.

Of course there have been theories over the years. In fact from 400-1600 the book was called the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews. It got this name because it is very well written and shows evidence of being put together by someone with a deep theological understanding – of all the authors in the New Testament Paul was the obvious choice.

But during the Reformation Martin Luther and some of the other scholars noticed that the style of the book of Hebrews was very different from everything else Paul had written. In every one of Paul's letters he always clearly identifies himself as the author, but Hebrews doesn't have anything like this. On top of this the vocabulary used in Hebrews is very different from all of Paul's other letters so it was concluded that Paul couldn't be the author.

So if it wasn't Paul, who could it be? It turns out there are a couple other possibilities. In about 200 AD one of the church Fathers, a man named Tertullian, attributed it to the encourager Barnabas, Paul's traveling companion for much of his ministry.

Barnabas was of course very well known to the church and spent a lot of time with Paul so would have gained the theological understanding necessary to write what we get in Hebrews. And actually Barnabas is who I like to think wrote this.

Of course it doesn't really matter what I think and most scholars today attribute the epistle to Apollos; a man the book of Acts tells us was eloquent in speech and mighty in the Scriptures.³ He also spent time with Paul and the other Apostles and would have been able to write what we find here.⁴

So that's just a little background information on where this book came from.

The second point of context I want to give narrows in on why the author of Hebrews makes such a big deal about living by faith.

As I've already said, the whole book of Hebrews looks at the world of uncertainty we live in and seeks to answer the question "What does it mean to live fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus?" And chapter 11 is really a turning point in the progression of the book. Up until now the author has argued for the supremacy of Christ over every aspect of the universe, and now he turns to what it looks like to live in light of the supremacy of Christ – to live in faith.

³ Acts 18:24

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:12

But just before outlining this with the several examples we are going to look at over the next few weeks, the author recognized that the Hebrew people he was writing to were already living in faith in a big way. At the end of chapter 10 he commends and challenges them saying:

You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. (Hebrews 10:34-35)

In other words these people were living fueled by an incredibly passionate and real faith, following Jesus even when it required great sacrifice on their part. And now the author urges them to confidently continue living this way.

And the reason they were to maintain this kind of a life was not because of duty – because it was the right thing to do – but because giving up comfort to serve Christ gains the rich reward of better and lasting possessions – and this of course ties to our last series. Following Jesus faithfully yields a reward that makes everything worth while. That’s why living by faith is such a big deal – it leads us to the true joy we were created for regardless of what the circumstances are around us.

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The final point of context that we need to establish before we jump into chapter 11 and what it looks like to live fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus is that the Christian faith discussed in this book is a faith in something real.

Our culture today largely accepts faith, but the “popular faith” of North America is really just positive thinking surrounding whatever it is that you use to pump yourself up.

So if you believe in Buddha, and his teachings help you live a happy life, then that’s good faith. Or if you believe in yourself and your own ability to be a great person, then that’s good faith. And of course if you believe in Jesus and that helps you be happy then that’s good faith regardless of whether or not it has any foundation in fact. And the world believes no religion has any basis in fact.

But the faith we are going to be talking about for the next several weeks really has nothing in common with the world’s kind of faith. Christian faith is dependant on Jesus being a real historical person, who did something real for us on the cross, and who can do something real in us today. This truth claim is such that if Jesus did not rise from the dead – which is an impossible miracle only God could do – then everything about Christianity is absolutely worthless and should be immediately discarded by every Jesus follower world wide. Christian faith rests on that truth claim.

And so before chapter 11 the author establishes the foundational truth claims about who Jesus is and what He does for and in those who put their faith in Him. So we read Jesus:

-Died as the final sacrifice necessary for our sins (9:14)

It tells us:

-His blood perfects us and makes us holy (10:14)

-and it clears our conscience so we can boldly come before God (10:22)

Hebrews tells us

-Jesus understands us because He is one of us (4:15)

But -But He isn't just one of us, He is also God. (4:14)

And because He is both God and man

-He now is able to be our perfect advocate defending us against our accuser (7:25)

But he doesn't just advocate for us,

-He actually changes us to look like Him, putting His law in our minds and writing it on our hearts by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit(8:10)

And so when we come to Him in faith He

-forgives our wickedness and forgets our sins altogether (8:12)

And He

-promises never to leave us or forsake us (13:5-6)

Those are all truth claims about the Jesus of the Bible, and that is the Jesus that Hebrews chapter 11 argues we should put our faith in.

The claim then is that because the God of the Universe did something utterly remarkable for us – namely He saved us from our sins and made it possible for us to re-enter a relationship with Him – we should live differently than everyone else around us, we should live by faith.

So let's look now at the first three verses of chapter 11 and unpack the definition of faith that we find there.

Let's start with verse 1.

[Read Hebrews 11:1]

Now the first task this verse leaves us with is unpacking the definition of faith it presents. In chapter 10 we already saw what faith looks like worked out – it means willingly embracing hardship to look like Jesus in order to gain the joy of God's reward – that's what faith looks like.

But verse 1 adds two new things to this – assurance and conviction. "Now faith is the **assurance** of things hoped for, the **conviction** of things not seen."

Now I'm preaching from the ESV translation today (which I don't usually do), but I want to highlight a bit of the difficult waters we run into at this point and the ESV allows me to do this. These two words – “assurance” and “conviction” are notoriously difficult to translate into English. And if you are reading a different translation you will see right away that the translators have given us several different options to choose from. For example the King James says:

Now faith is the **substance** of things hoped for, the **evidence** of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1 KJV)

And if you are using a pew Bible, the older NIV says:

Now faith is being **sure** of what we hope for and **certain** of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1 NIV)

So you can see there is quite a range of words used to unpack the Greek here, and that's because these words are difficult to translate. But we need to dig into this difficulty because if we are going to unpack what it means to live a life fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus we need to understand what faith is.

So let's look at these two words starting with the second which is translated “conviction” in the ESV and “evidence” in the King James.

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Right off the bat you should realize how different these two concepts appear in English. The word “conviction” refers to something we believe to be true, while “evidence” refers to something no one can deny. That's pretty different, but what I want to show you is how actually both of these translations give an accurate picture of what is being described here.

Now this word doesn't appear anywhere else in the New Testament, and that is part of the reason it is difficult. And so when this happens translators look at how it is used outside the Bible. And in general this word is usually translated very similar to how the King James does – as either “proof” or “evidence.”

But how can faith be proof?

For example, by show of hands, if I told you I had fifty dollars in my pocket how many of you would believe me?

Well it turns out your faith would be mistaken. I actually have only twenty dollars in my pocket. But now that you've seen this evidence, aside from the possibility that I might be a magician – which I am not – most would agree it would not require any faith at this point to believe that there is a twenty dollar bill in my pocket – you've seen the proof.

So faith and proof seem like strange things to put together. Instead if we are going to talk about faith “conviction” seems to make more sense. And if we look forward to verse 3 this seems to line up better with what we read there.

[Read Hebrews 11:3]

Now on one hand the fact that creation exists is evidence that it had to come from somewhere, but verse 3 doesn't say "it is by faith that we know that the universe exists" – then we would be talking about the Matrix, instead it says "it is by faith that we know **how** the universe came into existence – namely by the word of God.

And faith is required to answer this question because none of us were there at Creation.

So there is no evidence or proof for how God made the world, but by faith or out of conviction we understand that it came into existence through God's spoken word. And we believe this because this is what the Bible says.

Along this line in 2 Corinthians Paul says:

We walk by faith and not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

So faith is not sight, and so the translation "faith is... the **conviction** of things not seen" seems to fit.

But this isn't the complete Biblical picture of faith or even creation. In Romans chapter 1 Paul describes the reality of Christianity in a very different way. He says:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

Here Paul says God's invisible qualities or attributes are clearly seen in creation. Now that seems like an oxymoron at first – how can something be both invisible and clearly seen. But Paul's point is that in creation God has given humanity evidence that He exists. And some of us see that evidence because some of us have faith.

This last weekend Nikki and I spent some down time out at her family cabin which is 160km down the Black Water road – so in the middle of nowhere. And one evening at about midnight we were sitting out on the dock looking at the clear canvas of stars that stretched out endlessly before us and Nikki's dad, who joined us, said:

Look at the Big Dipper. Now look at the first star on the handle of the Big Dipper. "Ok I said". And then he said in Roman days if you wanted to be a spy the military commander would ask you "how many stars do you see when you look at that first star in the big dipper handle?"

And I said “one”, but Nikki said “two.” And then he said “Nikki, with her glasses, would make the cut and I’d still be looking for work.

Now at this point I vehemently argued that they were pulling my leg until they handed me a pair of binoculars and I decided I probably need to get my eyes checked.

But the point is this; two people can look at the same thing and see something different. And so it is with God’s invisible qualities that can be clearly seen in creation. If you have faith then the awe-inspiring, complexity in creation becomes the fingerprint evidence that God is at work all around us. But on the other hand, without faith the exact same creation appears to some as a random accident of chance. It isn’t that faith changes reality, but rather that faith makes the reality around us clearly visible. Faith, like glasses or binoculars, brings the evidence to light.

And both these aspects are wrapped up in that one Greek word. And so we can speak then of faith being both a matter of conviction and a matter of evidence.

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So let me ask you, do you see the evidence that God is dynamically at work in the midst of whatever situation you find yourself in today? And do you live differently because of this evidence, full of conviction that in fact this is true? This is what it means to live fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus.

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Now let’s now look at the first half of verse 1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.”

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Like with the word “conviction” or “evidence” we again need to see the full picture of what this word is getting at. At first we can easily agree that faith is obviously a deep confidence that what God says He will do will in fact happen. In other words we can bank on God’s promises. We can be assured they are true.

And given the context of Hebrews 11 and people choosing to live radical lives of obedience even giving up worldly possessions in order to honour God; speaking of faith as the assurance of God’s promises makes sense.

The only reason anyone would be willing to risk everything for God would be if the reward was assured. And God says it is. God says in 10:34 that those who live this way receive the reward of better and lasting possessions.

And so faith is the assurance that God will keep His promise. But again I want to look at the wording of the King James because it draws something else out here. It says:

Faith is the **substance** of things hoped for.

Now the substance of something is its nature or its essence, so for example in chapter 1 Jesus is compared to God the Father and we read:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the **exact representation** of his being (Hebrews 1:3)

So Jesus and the Father are exactly the same at their core, or you could say they share the same nature or essence or substance.

And likewise here in chapter 11 the sense is that faith grasps or lays hold of God's promises so tightly that in our faith itself there is the same substance of the goodness and the sweetness of God's promises.

Now this doesn't mean that faith creates what we hope for, as though with some positive thinking you can make things happen. But rather when we have faith we actually get to taste, which is a real and tangible thing, what God promises.

It's more than just being confident that we will get to experience God one day. Christian faith actually has substance to it now. It is actually something real. And this means when we live in faith we find ourselves not just having positive feelings, but actually living with God and experiencing what He has for us right today.

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Friends let me ask you, are you living differently than other people around you because you are assured that God's reward will be worth anything you have to give up? In fact do you live differently because you are already tasting the fruit of God's presence? That's the kind of life people live who are fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus.

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And this brings us back to where we began today. "What does it mean to live a life fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus Christ?"

And today we have seen that it is a life founded on both deep conviction even when we can't see, as well as evidence that we see because of faith. And on top of this it is a life lived with a real assurance that everything Jesus has promised will come to pass, in fact our faith is so real that it actually has substance causing us to live with God today enjoying the first fruits of eternal life right now.

This is what Christian faith is. And it is because it is so real and tangible that those who are fueled by it find themselves living so unlike those around us.

We don't have to serve the American dream getting the bigger house and the faster car, instead we can give up what the world around us holds dear without hardly a thought longing instead for the greater and lasting reward God promises.

Now over the next few weeks we are going to unpack this further, but I urge you not to leave today without examining your own heart on this matter: “Do you have this kind of faith? Are you someone who, like the Psalmist describes, tastes and sees that the Lord is good?”⁵

Is your faith so real that it is obvious to those around you that you are not the same person you would be if you didn't believe in Jesus? Brothers and sisters, do you have real, saving, faith?

If as you hear this you realize that perhaps you have been living with a faith that isn't like this at all, perhaps it amounts to little more than some positive feelings when times are good, but really has no strength to carry you through difficult waters, then I urge you to repent and stop trusting in yourself and your own abilities. And instead give yourself and your future to Jesus.

Now it is true that when Jesus calls us to Himself He calls us to give up everything else we trust in and that is scary. But He also promises that if we do the reward will be leagues better and longer lasting than anything we will ever give up.

So brothers and sisters, because of who Jesus is and because of what He has done for you in history and promises to do in you today, I urge you live differently. Live fueled by a fiery faith in Jesus so much so that you are willing to even suffer harm so that when your neighbours look at you they will see Jesus.

⁵ Psalm 34:8