

Hebrews 11 (Part 1) :1 • What is Faith?

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Hebrews 11. We finally come here, and what we find in this chapter is one of the most extensive studies of something that I know very little about I have come to decide, and that is the topic of faith. And I don't think I'm alone because I think there's a lot of misconceptions; there's a lot of misunderstanding about what faith is. I hope that we can clear some of those up maybe a little bit through the course of our study.

But you'll remember in the last chapter, the writer of Hebrews quoted a passage from Habakkuk that is actually quoted elsewhere in the New Testament. In fact, two other places in the New Testament. One of those is in the book of Galatians.

Let me put this up on the screen for you. Paul wrote:

Galatians 3:11 (ESV)

...it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."

"...it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for (and then here's the quote from Habakkuk) "The righteous shall live by faith.""

You'll remember that the author of Hebrews quoted that same statement, and that is the springboard into this whole chapter 11, which we call the *Hall of Faith*.

And concerning that faith that the righteous are to live by, the author essentially sets forth in this chapter two important elements concerning faith. And the first is a description of faith, which takes him all of one verse. And then he goes on in the remaining verses of the chapter, and he gives us examples of the demonstration of faith. And we're going to see that in the lives of several Bible characters.

But believe it or not, today we're just going to limit our discussion to the very first verse and which is the description of faith. So, let's read it, verse 1, Hebrews 11:

“Now, faith is the assurance (your Bible may say substance) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Let's begin with prayer.

Heavenly Father, as we dive into these studies about faith, we pray, Lord, for the grace from Your Spirit to apprehend this incredible topic. Lord, this topic that I am convinced I know so little about and goes so far beyond my understanding, but I pray, Father, that You would help us to make sense of just this simple statement concerning faith that is given here in the text.

For we know, Lord God, that in every drop of speech there is an ocean of truth, and we pray that You would impart that truth to us this day. In Jesus' precious name, amen.

You know when you just start reading through the Bible, or maybe when you first became a believer and started even hearing about the things related to the walk of Christ, it isn't very long before you come face-to-face with this idea, this subject of faith. And the thinking person wants to ask, “what is faith?”

Some people might take it for granted, but the thinking person wants to know what is faith. The problem is too often the answers that we get are not very good. In fact, many times the answers we get to the question, “what is faith” provide for us a list of what faith is not. So, I suppose as we get into this, it might be good to kind of eliminate all of the dopey answers that have kind of swirled around over the years as to what faith is, but in fact, it is not.

I'll put them up on the screen. These are the ones I could think of anyway.

What true biblical faith is NOT:

- *A positive feeling*
- *Blind optimism*
- *A manufactured “hope-so” attitude*
- *An intellectual nod of agreement to a belief*
- *Believing in spite of evidence*

First of all, it's not just a positive feeling, right? In fact, it's not a feeling at all. Faith is not a feeling.

It is also not blind optimism. There are some people who are naturally optimistic, there are some people who are naturally pessimistic, and then there are some who I suppose are probably in the middle somewhere depending on their circumstances. But it is not a blind optimism from the standpoint of “I don't really know what's going to happen, but...”

It is also not a manufactured “hope-so” attitude; we call that “wishful thinking.” It's not wishful thinking, or just “I really hope...” we'll talk more about hope.

It is also not an intellectual nod of agreement to a belief. Now, that is probably one of the most popular definitions of faith that I hear. I don't know about you, but it's probably one of the biggest ones that I hear. When somebody is talking about a loved one or a friend, or maybe someone they're dating or something like that. And we ask the question, “are they a believer?” They inevitably come back and say, “well, they believe in God,” which is really just an intellectual nod to the existence of God. And I think a lot of people think that's enough.

“Well, he believes in God.” Yeah. So does Satan. Yeah. So do the demons. They believe in God. They believe very much in God. The existence of God is very real to them. But that doesn't mean it has changed their lives. And it can be the very same, with you and me.

And then finally true faith or Biblical faith is not believing in spite of evidence. I thought of that one simply because I remember years ago I sat down with some Mormon missionaries in my living room - this has been a long time ago - and we spent like two hours going back and forth between what the Bible said and what the various books of Mormon say, which are not in agreement by the way.

And I brought up example after example of the evidence of God's word related to the truth and the revelation of how He had spoken to us in that word. And at the very end one of the guys said to me, “even if Mormonism was proven today to be false, I would continue to believe in it.” That is kind of what we're talking about there; that's believing in spite of the evidence. And that's not what true Biblical faith is.

It is important to note as we look at this verse, this first verse of Hebrews 11, that what the author is giving us here is not a definition of faith; it is a description of faith and how it works in our lives. For a definition of faith, we would be here a very long time. And if I were to begin to try to expound to you a definition of faith, I would find myself at a loss for words because, I'll be honest with you, I'm not sure I can define it for you.

Again, this is a description given to us here. Definition? Yeah, that's a challenge. I mean, if you really think it through, and the more I have been thinking about faith, the more I have come to the conclusion I understand very little of what the dynamic of faith really is. I can tell you how it plays out in our life, but that's not a definition, that's a description.

And that's kind of what the author here of Hebrews is doing. So, you'll notice that here in verse 1, he begins with this biblical description this way. He says, "*Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for,*" and of course, there's two words there that we need to fully understand, and they are *assurance* and *hope* or *hoped*.

We're first told that faith is the assurance. Some of your Bibles say "substance." The NIV says "confidence." But assurance and substance are probably some of the best - interestingly enough, I found out that this Greek word was used in legal documents to describe a piece of property that was owned by someone, and this word describes evidence of ownership; kind of like you and I would think of a title deed.

I can tell you I own this piece of property, but if someone were to question me, I might have to dig through my records and pull out the title deed and say, "See! Right here, I own this property." The writer of Hebrews is telling us that faith is the title deed, if you will, in a strange sort of a way for what we hope for.

It is in fact the thing that makes our hope tangibly real, like the title deed would make my ownership of property tangibly real. I can say all day long, "I own this," but I can show you with the title deed and my faith shows you in a tangible way that what I hope for is real.

And I know this can be challenging to understand, but it's important that our faith makes our hope tangible because the blessings that we claim as Christians are spiritual blessings. And that means they're invisible, but faith makes the invisible visible.

That's what he's saying here. Faith is the assurance; the proof, the title deed, if you will, to the things that we hope for. Where our hope lies. The tangibility of those hopes is found in our faith, which is the assurance, the conviction, that these things are in fact real.

And then the other word that we want to look at here is this word "hope," or *hoped* as he uses it. But the word "hope" is what we're looking at. He says, "*faith is the assurance of things hoped for.*" And of course, we use the word

hope many times in our daily conversation. I do, I'm sure you do as well. Rarely do we use it in a truly Biblical sense. We use it in a much more “express-a-wish” kind of sense. “I hope the weather is good on Friday when we take our bike ride,” or “I really hope our team wins this weekend.” “I hope she likes me.”

Those are the ways we express hope, but those usages really have no correlation to the Biblical idea or definition of hope. Even though the world probably sees our hope like the way we express our hope for the weather to be nice, they probably think our hope is kind of the same thing.

“You Christians are hoping for this or this, just like we would hope for a good weather day in a week or so.” No, it's actually very different. And the thing that makes our hope different is God; is the assurance that comes from knowing God. Otherwise, it is a pipe dream.

I found a wonderful quote - the very first A.W. Tozer book I ever read in my life was a book called *Knowledge of the Holy*. I was in my twenties at the time, and I remember it was even a little bit of a challenge intellectually because he was kind of a brainiac but let me show you this quote. He writes:

“Upon God's faithfulness rests our whole hope of future blessedness. Only as He is faithful will His covenants stand and His promises be honored. Only as we have complete assurance that He is faithful may we live in peace and look forward with assurance (there's that word again) to the life to come. – A.W. Tozer

You see, that's why our hope is different from the, “oh, I hope it goes well” sort of a wishful thinking of the world. It's because our hope is based in a person, not a wish. And our hope is based, not just in a person, but a faithful person; a person who cannot disappoint. And that's not to say that we don't become disappointed sometimes, but that usually happens because we've put our hope in something related to God that He never promised. We'll talk about that here in a bit.

So, the next description of faith that we're given here at the end of verse 1 is it says that it is “*the conviction...*” that word is again, also translated evidence “*of things not seen.*” The conviction or evidence of things not seen. And this is talking about that inward conviction that is possessed by the believer that God has promised something that He is going to bring to pass.

And I know that, I know He's going to bring it to pass. I know He is. "Well, how do you know that?" Because I have faith. "Well, faith, that's just wishful thinking." No, it's not.

It's confident expectation based on the person of God and His faithfulness; His unchanging, unwavering faithfulness. And so therefore, it is the understanding that He will bring these things to pass. And the very presence of our conviction is all the evidence that the child of God needs. And when we have this conviction, we simply know that God is going to do what He said He's going to do.

And there's so many things that we hope for, the conviction of things not seen. There's a lot of things we don't see, guys, don't we? I mean, what we see doesn't really inspire us a whole lot, to be honest with you. What we see in this world is kind of depressing. And honestly, I can totally understand why people in this world, apart from Christ, have to take pills to deal with their depression. I completely understand because if that's what you've got to look at, that's a pretty nasty view. Because the world is deteriorating, our bodies are deteriorating. Boy, isn't that just a fun thing to think about?

I love old classic movies. I always have. I passed along a love of them to my children too. And their kids are like, if they hear a movie's in black and white, they're like "no, we don't do black and white movies." But for some reason my kids did kind of enjoy them.

The other day I was rewatching an old movie that, interestingly enough, is not in black and white, but it's still considered a classic movie, great Gene Kelly movie called *Brigadoon*. It's a musical, which I'll be honest, I fast forward through the dancing and sometimes some of the songs, but that part isn't my favorite part.

But I look at all these characters, in this movie, *Brigadoon*, and it was filmed back in the early fifties, I think like '53, '54. And I'm looking at the actors and actresses, and of course most of them are gone. In fact, except for maybe the children, they're probably all gone now.

And one of the things I like to do is I like to kind of look up, after I watch a movie I'll Google the name of a particular actor or actress and just kind of see what else they did with their life, how their life kind of went. Well, I found this one gal and she really had kind of a small part in the movie, but I was just kind of looking and found out that she actually just passed away last year at a very... she was old.

And I saw they had a recent picture of her shortly before she died. And I looked at that picture and they had, of course, the comparison of her in her heyday of the fifties when she was in movies. And I looked at that and I thought, “wow, what life does to us.” From birth to death, if the Lord even gives us that many years, I think good grief.

I can look at those sorts of things and kind of go, “well, we have something better.” But can you imagine? Can you imagine Christians, if you did just what I did and you had no hope beyond this life, if you looked up the life of a 1940s or whatever, actor or actress, and then you saw a picture of them before they passed away and you thought, “Look what life did to that person,” and then they're gone and then there's nothing; I'd be depressed.

So, our hope is in so many things that this world cannot supply. So, what do we hope in? What do we hope for? Oh, let me count the ways. So, I came up with a list. This isn't comprehensive by any stretch. I'll put it up on the screen for you:

- Forgiveness is found only in the cross of Jesus
- The Lord will never leave us nor forsake us
- God is sovereignly overseeing the affairs of mankind
- God will lead us according to the purpose of His will
- Jesus will return for His Church
- Physical death ushers us into His presence
- We will receive a new physical body/death vanquished
- We will be transformed into His likeness
- We will be reunited with those who have died in Christ

Our hope is in that Jesus is, the way He is, the way that we are forgiven for all of our sin; His work on the cross. That He will never leave us nor forsake us. That He is sovereignly overseeing the affairs of mankind. That's our hope. We hope that God will lead us always according to His purpose and will when we're praying. We trust He's going to lead us.

We trust that Jesus is going to return for his church. That's our hope. We hope He's going to return. And it's not just, “oh, I hope He is going to return.” Our hope is *in* His return because He said He would return and He is faithful and His word is sure. You see the difference? We also have this hope that physical death ushers us into the presence of God. If we are on this earth long enough to experience it before the Lord comes, we have a hope that we're going to receive a new physical body and that death will one day completely be vanquished.

These are things that my hope is in; I'm hoping. And again, it's not just, I hope these things happen. They are my hope; that we are going to be transformed into His likeness. That we are going to be reunited with those who went before us, who died in Christ. This is our hope in the Lord. And the apostle Paul wrote about this when he wrote to Titus; on the screen, let me show you this. He says:

Titus 2:11-14 (ESV)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, (while we do what? While we are) waiting for our blessed hope, (which is what? 'I hope I get that new job?' No. It is) the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ...

That is where our hope lies.

Whenever we're discussing hope - hope is an interesting dynamic, isn't it? Have you ever had your hope dashed? Sure. All of us have, every one of us. And particularly as it relates to things that God has promised, we have to be careful not to place our hope in things that He never said. Happens all the time. Can I just tell you? Happens all the time. I'm talking Christians putting their hope in things that God never promised.

And so honestly, that's one of the huge dangers with the prosperity movement that I see anyway. And I saw the prosperity movement up close and personal. The first church that Sue and I served in and attended after we really gave our lives to the Lord was very much influenced by the prosperity movement.

And there was a lot of that going on and a lot of expectation in things that God never promised.

And there's an interesting consistency about promises that God never made in areas or churches that are influenced by the prosperity doctrine or that sort of thing. But you'll notice that they are almost singularly fixated on this life. You with me? All the things that I believe that prosperity churches hang on to which are unbiblical as a hope are almost exclusively directed to life on this planet. They really have very little to do with eternal life, which is interesting that they focus so much of God's word and God's promises on this life because

interestingly enough, this life is something God's word tells us not to become too attached to.

I always think of the words of Peter, let me put these on the screen for you. 1 Peter 2:11, he writes:

1 Peter 2:11 (ESV)

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

“Beloved, (and that's always directed to Christians when they say, ‘beloved,’) I urge you as (and then he describes you with two things,) sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

Notice you are called a *sojourner*, which is a traveler, and that's simply a way of saying you're passing through. “I'm just passing through... this isn't home. Just passing through.” Right? And the other thing he calls you is an *exile*, which you probably hear quite a bit in the news, but an exile is somebody who is living in a place that is not his country; not his native land, if you will.

So, you and I are exiles here on earth, which is to say, we're not home. This isn't our home; this isn't our long-term address. And that's not to say that God doesn't care about your life or God doesn't care about the things that are going on in your life. He cares very much. He cares very much about the things you are enduring, the things that challenge you. He cares very much and He wants to bless you in this life, but you are never intended to fix your hope on this life.

That's the point you see, because when we do, we invariably get disappointed because it seems like God is not rewarding our faith the way we think He should, or we were taught perhaps that He should.

I have to tell you, I got a very tender note from a gal just this week that illustrates what happens when faith is misunderstood. And the emphasis on it is placed in the now instead of eternity, and temporal issues begin to be the focus of kind of everything. And her note to me went like this, let me share it with you. She says:

“Hello, Pastor. I had an uncle who was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. We prayed and prayed with all faith and power, but yesterday we lost him. After all this praying, he's gone. Why didn't Jesus heal him? He told us with faith we could move mountains.”

She writes, "So many people were praying for him and he wanted to be healed, but God didn't hear him. Why has this happened?"

How would you like to answer that note? Well, I did. I responded back to her and I encouraged her. I started off by telling her how sorry I was to hear of the passing of her uncle. But I did my best to gently bring her back to a Biblical understanding of the promises of God related to life on this earth. And the fact that just because you have faith doesn't mean God is obligated. God is not a vending machine where you put the proper amount of coins in and push the button and out comes your prize.

God cares. He is sovereign, and He will work according to the purpose of His will always. And sometimes His will runs contrary to ours. If you're me, it's most of the time.

So, I tried my best to encourage her. She shared with me that her uncle was a believer, and I even challenged her gently and said, "you said, on the one hand he is a believer, and on the other hand you said we lost him." And I said, "did you lose him? Is he lost or is he now enjoying the presence of his Savior? And if you could speak to him right now, do you think he feels cheated? Do you think he'd want to come back and live in that broken body?"

She wrote me back. She thanked me, but she went on to say something that I think is kind of germane to this whole idea of when we've become convinced of things that are not ours to truly hope in. She wrote me back and she said:

"My uncle's grown children go to a church that told them that their dad would be healed in Jesus' name and that they had to keep their faith strong so that the miracle would happen. They wouldn't allow anyone to even suggest that their dad might not make it. They believe that to express such things would keep the miracle from happening. Now, after he has passed away, they're asking, where's Jesus and why didn't he heal our dad?"

She writes, "I can't even tell them he's in a better place because they think there is no better place than with them."

"Sadly," she wrote, "some have turned away from Christ."

That, brothers and sisters in Jesus, is the reality of what happens when we allow the Bible to say things that it doesn't really say such as "a Christian should never experience this kind of sickness and death."

I'll be honest with you, there was a time in my life that I wanted to embrace the prosperity doctrine. I mean, why not? It sounded good to me. God wanted me rich and healthy. I'll take it! I like that. That sounds like a really good deal. The problem is God called me to be a Bible teacher and to teach the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation. And as I did, I realized I couldn't sustain that belief. And that the blessings and the promises that God had given me were not so much for this life, but for the next one, and that He wanted my focus to be there, not here.

And that bothered me at first. It bummed me out. I'll just tell you, it kind of bummed me out. And I learned that contrary to what I'd been taught, God does not promise physical healing every single time. And contrary to what I'd been taught, physical healing was not a promise included in the covenant that Jesus made with the church. It is taught in many churches that it is, and they will quote “*by His wounds, we are healed*” and say, “proof positive.” That passage refers to spiritual healing, not physical.

And that was a shock to me and I didn't really want to embrace it, but it meant that I had to shift my hope which was centered before in this life to being centered on the life that is to come. And I don't want you to get me wrong. I don't want you to hear me saying that there are no promises for this life because there are wonderful promises that we have to hold onto by faith and put our hope in related to this life.

For example, God has promised to provide for us. Jesus made that very clear. He talked about the fact that God takes care feeds the birds of the air cloth the flowers of the field. “*How much more will He feed and clothe you, oh you of little faith?*” We know there's wonderful promises in the word of God for today, for now, for this life. But far and away the promises of God toward believers are focused on the life to come.

And that's where our faith has to be. That's where our faith needs to be directed. That is in fact why the Apostle Paul wrote what he did to the Colossians. Let me show you this from chapter 3:2-4. He says:

Colossians 3:2-4 (ESV)

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

So he says set your sights, your vision on that which is to come, not on the earth. Don't make the earth your goal, your focus, your hope. This world is not our hope.

Now as I close out this first study on Hebrews 11, I have to confess to you that as we get into the rest of this chapter and the author goes through and gives us those examples of faith, I'm going to tell you once again that the language of faith is one that I'm not sure I know always how to speak.

And I use that term purposefully, *the language of faith*. I learned a great deal about faith the last time we studied through the book of Psalms, to be honest with you. And I've read the Psalms many times. I've taught through it now three times from beginning to end, every single chapter and verse. I learned more in this last study of the Psalms about faith than I have ever before.

The language of faith, guys David spoke the language of faith and he spoke it fluently and it's beautiful. And if you need to learn how to speak that language, I would encourage you to live in the Psalms for a period of time and learn from David and hear how he talks to God. He was very honest with God, very honest about how he felt. Even complained from time to time, but yet he put his faith in God and he spoke that language.

It's a language that I have come to understand that I stumble over quite often, but it is a language that we all must learn. It is an attitude that we all must embrace and it is a lifestyle that we must live "*for the righteous shall live by faith.*" That is how we live.

Let's stand.

So, consider this kind of the preamble to the rest of our study of faith. This is just the preface, those opening thoughts to kind of prime the pump or oil the gears for what we're going to be learning about in the coming studies here about faith. And I really pray that as we go through this study, that God increases our faith. If there's one need that every one of us here has, it's to have more faith. Lord, give me more faith.

We're going to have our prayer team down to pray with you as we close. So, take advantage of that if you need to. Father, thank You so much for Your word. And we just confess here at the outset that this really kind of goes beyond our ability to truly apprehend.

But still, Father, we want to learn how to speak the language of faith. We want to learn how to converse with You in that language. We want to learn how to have an attitude of prevailing faith. We want to learn how to walk out a lifestyle of faith. And we pray, Lord, that You would help us to do that and enable us to do that. Father, empower us to live that life of faith. We ask You to go before us

in this, to guide and direct our hearts through Jesus Christ, our Savior and king,
amen.

God bless you. Have a good rest of your Sunday.