

What is Faith?

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back to Hebrews 11 and the opening words of the chapter. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

In the verse before this one, in chapter 10, the last verse of the chapter, we are told that Christians are believers.

That's what defines them, they are believers. And then in the book of chapter 11, we have a great narrative which shows faith in action.

This great kind of witness says who were believers in God, and who through that faith endured and achieved great acts of courage and service for God.

In those far-off days. It wasn't their faith that gave them such power, but the one they believed in.

[1 : 14] And to whom they bear witness, this long list of heroes, from Abel down to the judges, all of them showing for the power of the God they believed in.

But in between those two, between the affirmation that we Christians are believers, and this great parade of witnesses, we have a definition of what faith actually is.

And we're told it is assurance of things hoped for, and conviction of regard to things not seen. And one great emphasis clear here, that is that faith is certainty.

Faith is conviction. Faith is assurance. Faith isn't something doubtful, hesitant. It is to be persuaded. To be convinced. To be sure of what you believe in. That's very counter to our modern view, that doubt itself is so much a mark of humility, and where there's no doubt, then people doubt for us.

[2 : 32] Any modern bishop or theologian is bound to speak of his doubts, because that is humility to be doubting even this great Christian message.

But here, and the reformation likewise, we find a very different emphasis. We find that faith is certainty.

It's conviction. Now, of course, remember, the believer may have doubts. Sometimes our faith is shaken.

There are dark moments for the believer. But faith itself does not have doubt. Faith is conviction. Faith is assurance. That's the point that the writer he was going to cross to us, that faith is this great, has this great element of certainty.

[3 : 29] Faith is conviction. Faith is assurance. And you see that that assurance has two great directions, or two great focuses, or foci.

First of all, it should regard to what we cannot see. And then, to what we hope for. And reverse the order. It's conviction with regard to things unseen.

And again, with regard to things we hope for. And I want to explore those for a moment with you tonight. These two great poles. First of all, faith is assured with regard to the unseen.

Now, the unseen is all around us. Our great physical environment. We see it. We see sea. And we see the oceans.

We see the fields with stars, the sky. We see trees and plants and animals. We see buildings. We see great, massive mountains.

[4 : 37] All these things are visible. And because we see them, we think we know, well, we know they are real. And we also think very often that only what we see is, in fact, real.

The tyranny of the visible. That only what's seen is real. And, of course, the seen is real.

Although some philosophers have doubted even that. But the seen, what we see, yes, it's real. But we're told here, too, that there is a reality which is unseen.

Assured with regard to what we cannot see. And the unseen, in which we believe, that unseen, too, is real.

And faith is sure that there is an unseen world, unseen beings, and an unseen God.

[5 : 41] God, almighty, invisible, God, only wise. And so we are sure of him, of this invisible God, this God we cannot see, because he has no physical form.

But beyond that, it is this unseen world that explains why there is a world at all.

Why there is a seen world, only because there is an unseen world. Once there was nothing. Once God said, let there be, and there was.

But before God said that, there was nothing. Why then, how then, is there something? How come there are things we can see, and touch, and taste, and feel, and handle?

How come there is a world at all? And how come there is a world that is so full of complexity and beauty, of forces of all some magnitude?

[7 : 04] And how come it's a world that we humans can understand, and explore, and make sense of?

And Paul is the writer, and the writer, and the writer is saying to us here, that by faith we believe that the world was made by the word of God.

And the sin was made of things which are invisible. And so it's this invisible world that explains why there is a world at all.

Once we say there was nothing. But that wasn't the case. There was God. And when we say God, we mean that there was this eternal life, and this eternal love, and this eternal mind.

This invisible life, this invisible mind, this invisible love. He never began to be. He was always.

[8 : 18] Always was and be. And because he was, invisible though he is, we have a world today.

Because God said, let there be, and there was this universe, what we're told here, we're referred here as the ages. God called time into being.

Dare I say, once there was no time. Once there was no world. But there was God, this invisible God. And that's why there is this world.

Faith always seeks to understand. And to understand why there is a world at all.

And why this world makes sense. There is a visible world because there always was the invisible God. And this world admits of research by scientists because it's a product of an infinite mind.

[9 : 34] The mind of the invisible and almighty God. And so then, yes, we believe in that invisible God, in that invisible world that we cannot see.

That invisible God, he made it. but did he then leave it to run himself? Has he withdrawn into some remote fastness where he is still inaccessible and invisible and doesn't interact with the world in which we live?

praise God, that's not how it is. But the God who made the world is still engaged with that world and with us as parts of that world.

He still, he talks to it and he walks in it. One of great hymns reminds us, be still for the presence of the Lord is here.

The glory of the Lord is shining all around. Of course, again invisible but still so real and with us here as we gather before God tonight.

[11 : 02] Remember Moses, he endured we are told in this chapter because he saw the one who was invisible. There he was facing so many pressures and so much hostility from Pharaoh and from his very own people.

There he was in the desert of Midian. There he was often I'm sure confused but he endured because he saw the one who was invisible.

Remember Elisha there he was surrounded by the great Syrian army helpless caught in a trap as life and instant jeopardy and peril and a servant panicking master were done for.

We shall pray to remember open his eyes that he may see and he opened his eyes and he saw his whole world filled with chariots of fire because the glory of the Lord was indeed all around him.

have things changed so much since Moses day or since Elisha day is it not true that the Lord has said to us I am with you always to the end of the age when you gather in my name I am there in the midst I will never leave you nor forsake you God always within shouting distance God so intimately close I did mention sometimes you put your hand out you want to touch it's reassurance or is it an apology for a thought you have had or a sentiment that entered your heart and you are saying sorry Lord but he's there be still for the glory of the Lord is shining all around there cannot be a geographical location no point on a google map no mental condition no social condition in which we're bereft to that presence ascend thy heaven

[13 : 52] Lord you are there there if in death or hell or shul or I lie wherever I am God is there so yes he made it and he never left it he talked to his people he walked with his people I shall never leave you nor forsake you yea though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil for you are with me I don't speak by your own experience I'm speaking of the word of God and what it tells us is reality this invisible God explains the visible this invisible God fails this world and is with his people every step of the way always so near us our refuge a very present help or time of trouble it may be that at this very moment we feel desolate and alone and very sorry for ourselves and

God is only as far away as a prayer or a groan or a sigh and God will hear it I can guarantee you if we ask he will answer not audibly any more than visibly perhaps but still really and so that we have these many facts this certainty that there is an unseen world and that unseen God he is still engaged with the world and he will engage with you and with me and with all those who are in trouble near as somebody said that hands and feet not only with us and around us and above us and under us but in us dwelling in the hearts of each one of his children each one of you a walking living temple indwelt by

God the Father God the Son God the Holy Spirit also by a numberless community of angels they too unseen and all they serving the church of the living God and so then we have this here conviction for regard to the world we cannot see but then again notice this we are sure of the promises of God certain absolutely or should I say well faith is sure faith is so sure the believer not always sure but faith is always sure that God has promised God will one day perform go back to Abraham and the staggering promises that God made to him they seemed impossible of fulfillment and demanded such thrust and commitment of

Abraham in fact when he left out of the colonies he didn't even have a promise from God only a command God told him go didn't tell him where didn't tell him how didn't promise him help but off he went and he had faith in that commandment and that's important because sometimes we find God's commandments and God's law we find them awkward and inconvenient and we feel well there could be a better way and I might maybe adjust them or violate them or infringe them and still be happy we don't believe that obedience leads to fulfillment and divine commendation but Abraham did he didn't know where he was going he knew only where God wanted to go or to go out to a land I will show you that was the only promise I will show you maybe when we get there but I will show you can we parallel that I don't know but God's command was met with faith on Abraham's part and I can guarantee that every one of God's commands has your well being at heart God's will and your happiness are so merged and so intertwined we can never violate God's will with impunity but then think of all those promises God made to Abraham a promised land the land of Canaan so far away from

[19 : 54] Mesopotamia modern Iraq so far far away those hundreds of miles of desert and he got there and owned not an inch not any seed his son Isaac Jacob it was never theirs 400 years before that promise was fulfilled he never saw its actual fulfillment that was God's promise he believed it and it was fulfilled and God promised him a seed he was childless his wife was barren and yet he said

God said to not only a child but a seed more numerous than stars in the sky or the graves of sand on the seashore and God kept his word and God gave him Isaac and a seed beyond number and a great promise that in that seed all the Gentiles all the nations of the earth would be blessed and today all over the world millions remember Abraham and millions enjoy the blessing God promised him in every continent on earth that Abraham's children Abraham's physical seed Abraham's spiritual seed and almost every news bulletin the wonder of God's history they're there at the heart of the story never far away from the news because they're so pivotal to the whole destiny of the human race

Abraham's seed physical and spiritual in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed you could go on down through that long list of promises made to all those patriarchs all seemed impossible of fulfillment and yet God kept them Him what what our selves and God promises to us as Abraham's spiritual seed as believers and our assurance our certainty with regard to those great promises what are they well one of them is one says this if we confess our sins he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and you say what an anticlimax he's been talking of mega stories of grand narratives of the Middle East and all its complexities and now he comes with this very simple point but if you're a sinner and I pray God most of us are it's the most precious thing in the world that we confess he

forgives can it be and there are those whose lives are haunted perhaps by the memory of great sins or the memory of one great sin and they live with John Bunyan's giant in the iron cage of despair God will never have them maybe they say once I was almost a Christian but then there's this great barrier this one thing

I would venture to say without the moment qualifying it in God's sight either there are no great sins sin or all sins are great sins and no sin is greater than the blood of Christ with the cleansing power of his spirit with the height and depth length and breadth of divine grace no sin no great sin should keep us away from his savior that's why we need him because of our sins and they should cast iron guarantee if we confess he forgives him that comes to me or her comes to me

[25 : 37] I will in no wise in no circumstances I will never never never never turn you away if you come you will not be cast out and then there is another great promise that I cling to he believes in me will never die and though she die yet shall she live the words of the Lord to Martha mourning gave her her dead brother I knew so with apparent hopelessness at that moment the Lord saying believers in me never die remember the glorious words of the catechism and death believers their souls are made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory those who have gone before us they are alive our faithful believing dead alive in

Christ the Lord said to Martha in death my people are still alive Saint Paul said even to be with Christ is far better there we see him face to face there we see him as he is I've encountered this last while indirectly someone grieving and tormented because there is no faith here but the thought that the one that he loved no longer exists but that cannot be that God's word is true those in Christ that only exist through death but exist in life eternal vibrant intelligent emotional volitional creative life and never die alive in Christ perfect in holiness and in glory remember the Lord's challenge to Martha believe us thou this do you believe this believers in death absent from the body and present with the Lord and can we cling to that as our own destiny that we shall ever die but live in

Christ those who have gone before us we can see of them they live in our hearts and that's a great and noble truth but it's not the whole truth they live in Christ and beyond their current state of their being with the Lord and glory disembodied there lies a glorious moment of resurrection when the dead shall rise believest thou this immortality I read some time ago in the work of an eminent physicist God knows the DNA of every human who has ever lived and one day he will match soul and body in a perfect match believest thou this immortality resurrection and one day a new heaven and a new earth a reborn recreated reformed universe that's the promise that our faith clings to one day the world as we know it will end it's wonder it hasn't ended before now because of the competing forces within it that it hasn't crushed itself and hasn't blown itself to pieces but God has so adjusted these forces to secure this equilibrium this wonder that the world remains a stable place until God says the time has come to remake it as he remade the believer soul in the new birth and will remake her body in the resurrection so he will also remake this world and I tell you he will make it so so user friendly for his own people far beyond the glories of paradise the glories of the new heaven and the new earth and then there is last promise I want us to mention come unto me all who labour and are burdened and I will give you rest and who is not to us all because we are all weary and heavy laden it's a call to each and every human being to come who is he calling but you need who in this church tonight

[32 : 41] God is addressing these words to come to me and I will give you rest to the best of my knowledge there is no exclusion on the invitation there is no everyone except except those who exclude themselves come and I will give you rest I will not cast away I will not reject or refuse you Horatius Boner taught the church to sing these great words I heard the voice of Jesus say come unto me and rest lay down your head oh weary one lay down your head upon my breast we heard that voice

I came to Jesus as I was weary and worn and sad I found in him a resting place and he has made me glad I don't want to be dramatic but I recall that Christmas day 1939 it was broadcast to the empire war had begun that would devastate the world for five six long years and the king quoted in his address to the empire the words of an American poet Millie Hopkins I think it was I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year give me a life a light that

I may tread safely into the unknown he said to me put your hand hand in the hand of God and that will be to you safer clearer I should say than a light and safer than a known way put your hand in the hand of God we are an unlikely pairing God and me hand in hand but there is no one who has

such a fatherly heart as almighty God I found in him a resting place may we have the wisdom by God's grace to put our faith in him let's pray oh lord have mercy upon us in all our inadequacy you know lord that your children sometimes have to combat doubt but you give them lord a precious faith that is sure and certain that is assured and convinced and persuaded help us oh lord so that not that faith be real but the god we believe in that he be real to us and that he makes space for himself in our lives and walk with us every step of the way bless this congregation you walk among them you hold them in your hand you have your own great purposes of love for them unite them oh lord in love for each other in submission on the part of each one of our own interest to those of others and help us lord go forth hand in hand in the clarity of your own world in the safety of your presence for
Jesus sake amen