

Confident Faith

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[0 : 01] So we are reading from Hebrews chapter 11 verse 1. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.

And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found because God had taken him.

Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him.

[1 : 13] By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. Well good morning everyone.

Do be keeping Hebrews 11 open, and there's an outline of where we're going on the back of the service sheets. But as we start, let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, would my words faithfully explain your words? And would these words of yours be a great encouragement to us to trust you more, and so to base our lives around what you are revealing to us?

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well in 1987, George Michael launched his solo music career with his debut album Faith, featuring the hit single with the same name.

[2 : 23] Its refrain won't win any poetry prizes. Because I've got to have faith. I've got to have faith. Because I've got to have faith, faith, faith. I've got to have faith, faith, faith.

The single was number one in the US, and number two over here. So I guess a lot of people agree with the sentiment, or at least just like the tune.

Well this morning we're starting a new summer series, looking at Hebrews 11, which is all about faith. If you're new to Grace Church or you're just visiting this morning, you are very welcome.

This is a particularly good morning to be joining as we start this series. If the Hebrews 11 album is titled Faith, then today is the first of seven singles from that album.

And the big point that the writer to the Hebrews will be making is, you've got to have faith. But as we'll see, not the rather nebulous George Michael type of faith, but the same faith seen throughout the Old Testament in the lives of believers.

[3 : 29] In faith terms, these people are our spiritual ancestors. Hebrews 11 is rather like an episode of the BBC program, Who Do You Think You Are?

where faith, rather than genetics, is the common ancestral link. We are to learn how to live in faith as we look to how our spiritual ancestors lived in faith.

But first we need to think about the situation of the original readers. So if you look back to Hebrews 10 verse 32, we see that they were believers suffering for their beliefs.

And that condemnation, sorry, that suffering is described as a hard struggle. Public condemnation, potential imprisonment, and the plundering of their property.

They'd started well, as chapter 10 verse 32 makes clear. But now it's all getting too tough. They're tempted to give up.

[4 : 33] Let me read verses 35 and 36. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you've done the will of God, you may

receive a great reward.

The risk is that they throw away their confidence. For them it might be the temptation to go back to Jewish traditions, rather than trusting Jesus for their salvation, when trusting Jesus is proving costly.

For us it might be the temptation to turn back to the lives we were leading before we started out as Christians, because being a Christian seems like a hard struggle.

Perhaps we're suffering public reproach for standing up for our faith at school, or in the office, with families and with friends. Well, what the original readers needed was endurance.

It's the same for us. Endurance is a necessity. It's not a nice to have.

[5 : 45] Look on to the start of chapter 12, just over the page. In verse 1, the writer refers to other difficulties that face his readers, difficulties faced by every Christian.

He says, That word endurance again.

Well, how light is your load at the moment? Perhaps it's been a busy time at work and at home.

Perhaps your body battery is feeling pretty empty right now.

Perhaps the pressures of everyday life are making living the Christian life seem a challenge too far. Or perhaps there are particular sins that you can't seem to shake off, because they just seem to cling so closely.

That's the reality of the Christian race the original readers were running. And it's the reality of the Christian race we are all running. We're all tempted to give up.

[6 : 50] Well, given the way that chapter 12 starts, the message the writer wants his readers to take from chapter 11 is to run the race with endurance. Well, how is this endurance going to be built?

By having the great crowd of witnesses we'll meet in chapter 11 show us what true faith looks like.

So we could see this summer series as a spiritual gym, building endurance by regular sessions, reflecting on the lived experiences of our spiritual ancestors living by faith.

Now, some of us hate time in the gym. Some of us perhaps are keener on it. But all of us are running the Christian race. We all need endurance.

So we need this spiritual workout, deepening our faith. I think that's given you the shape of where we're going and encouraged you to stick with the training program throughout the summer.

But before we start thinking about the faith of particular believers, we need to think through what the writer means by faith. faith. And that's our first point. Now, faith is trusting God's word about unseen reality.

[8 : 04] Verse 1 of chapter 11. Now, faith is the assurance the things hope for, the conviction of things not seen. Now, this isn't a full definition of faith, but it's one that emphasizes two important dimensions.

Living faith is future-focused, and living faith is founded on invisible truths. As such, living faith is a three-dimensional faith.

It doesn't just trust in what we see based on the world around us. Everyone has that one-dimensional faith. Now, we're all trusting, sitting here this morning, that the roof won't crash down on us before the end of the service, even if there might be a few raindrops that come through the roof during the course of the service.

Or we trust that a friend will stick with us because our experience has been that they have in the past. But the writer of the letter to the Hebrews wants to emphasize that living faith prizes the future new creation above this creation and prizes God's invisible kingdom where Jesus is already seated at the right hand of God over the united kingdom.

These are the second and the third dimensions that make everyday faith into living faith. Now, we all know that just because we can't see something doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

[9 : 34] A few weeks ago, I was in the French Alps with some friends for a weekend where there were a series of running races. One of them, entitled the Douai Etual, is a 21-kilometer mountain trail race starting at 7 o'clock in the evening.

At the start, it's light. But for most competitors, it's become dark long before they finish. Without a head torch, they can't see the path.

They can't pick their way between the rocks and the tree roots. But just because they can't see the path, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. If they don't turn on their head torches, they will quickly discover the unseen realities of all manner of tripping hazards.

In the same way, there are unseen spiritual realities that really do exist. We can't see them, but we can be confident that they exist because God has revealed them to us in his word, the Bible. This is not blind faith. In verse 1, the words assurance and conviction shows us just how reliable this faith is. If you like, the Bible is a spiritual head torch enabling us to appreciate the path ahead and to see what we can't see with our own eyes.

[10:56] So we can be confident that God exists and we can be confident about his character when we look to Jesus. We can be confident that Jesus died and rose again and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God as we see in chapter 12, verse 3.

We can be assured that heaven really is the destination for all believers and really is worth the wait as those of us in growth groups were thinking about last Tuesday when we looked at the picture of heaven presented at the very end of the Bible.

So our writer is about to show how this three-dimensional faith was displayed in the lives of believers throughout the Old Testament. But first, like any good advocate, he wants to bring his readers with him.

He wants to get them and us on board with the logic of his arguments by referring to our shared foundational faith in creation. Let me read verse 3.

By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are unseen.

[12:13] Well, all Christians across the world believe that God created the world, even if they might disagree about how he did it and how literally to take the start of Genesis.

That God created the world by his word is a matter of faith. Not even David Attenborough was around to see it happen. But creation's place in the writer's argument in this chapter of Hebrews is foundational.

Many of you will have come across Dick Lucas. He was one of the foremost pastors and preachers of the 20th century. He describes verse 3 as the most important verse in the chapter.

He says that trying to understand Hebrews 11 without understanding verse 3 is like him trying to read Hebrews 11 without his reading glasses on. It's all blurred and not in focus.

Well, what does Dick mean? Well, if God created the visible world from nothing, that implies that there are two worlds. The visible temporal world where we live and the invisible eternal world where God lives.

[13:27] The writer's point is that true faith regards the visible temporal world as secondary to and less significant than the invisible eternal world.

So I wonder if you just turn back quickly to Hebrews chapter 1 verse 10 which should be on page 1203.

And here the writer to the Hebrews is quoting from Psalm 102 and this is what he quotes in verse 10. You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish but you remain. They will all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up. Like a garment, they will be changed.

But you are the same and your years will have no end. In eternal terms, this world is like a t-shirt that will become worn out and then will be thrown out.

[14:36] Now as I was writing this talk, coincidentally my wife Catherine was asking me if she could throw out a t-shirt I'd had for about 15 years. A particular favorite t-shirt but it had become worn out.

So living faith trusts that the unseen invisible world is more significant than the current world. Now that's a challenge for us given how pressing and powerful the things can seem around us.

It's also been a challenge for every believer. However, the writer will now show us how true believers have always had this perspective throughout biblical history so we can learn from their faith.

And that faith has always been commended by God which is our second point. So we start with Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve.

You may remember that both Abel and his older brother Cain offered sacrifices to God. They did so even though neither could see God. God accepted Abel's sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock of sheep but he had no regard for Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground.

[15 : 49] Now in Genesis 4 we're not told why God accepted one and rejected the other. But we learn in Hebrews 11 that it was because Abel had faith and he was commended as righteous for having that faith.

The implication is that Cain didn't have faith. Certainly we read on that Cain is jealous at Abel's preferential treatment.

He ignores God's warning that he must rule over the sin crouching at his door and in his jealousy he commits the first murder killing Abel.

In one sense Abel is the first Christian martyr. At the end of verse 4 of chapter 11 in Hebrews we're told that through Abel's faith though he died he still speaks.

So it seems as if the writer is saying that there's an important lesson for his readers and for us from Abel. Cain may well have given God the best that he had of his grain offering but the best he could offer wasn't good enough for God if he was trusting in that offering to make him right with God.

[17 : 04] By contrast unseen and unremarked upon by the writer of Genesis Abel's offering was different. He offered a blood sacrifice not because he was trusting it made him right with God but because he knew from his parents that the punishment for sin was death and only a death in his place could reconcile him to God.

That's the sense in which I think Abel is still speaking. It's as if through the ultimate blood sacrifice of Jesus dying on the cross Abel still lives though he died.

Within the visible church the religious observances of many will look the same on the outside. Abel still speaks to remind us that it's what goes on on the inside that matters.

Are we trusting only in Jesus' death for our salvation rather than in our own spiritual performance? Listen to Abel as he still speaks to us and share his faith.

Next on to Enoch chapter further on in Genesis Genesis chapter 5 verse 24 we read that Enoch walked with God and he was not found for God took him.

[18 : 28] Nestled in a roll call of his ancestors and his descendants Enoch stands apart. In the case of every other life listed the briefest of biographies ends with the words and he died.

Not so with Enoch. He didn't die. Instead he went straight to be with God in heaven. What was striking was that Enoch walked with God and because he walked with God he was commended as having pleased God.

A picture of walking with God is a picture of a regular dialogue enjoying each other's company and heading in the same direction. There's a Radio 4 program called Ramblings maybe you've heard it. As the BBC blurb puts it Claire Balding and guests share inspiring conversations while walking in the great outdoors. Walking together is the mutual activity enabling them to open up and share their lives.

Well walking with God implies intimacy even though we can't see him. For Enoch as verse 6 puts it he drew near to God believing that he existed and that he rewarded those who seek him.

[19 : 51] It was an act of faith. Well sometimes an older Christian might encourage a younger Christian with the question how's your walk with God or how's your walk with the Lord?

It's a good question because it emphasizes that living faith is based on a personal relationship enjoying God's company even if we can't see him.

If the word of God is so powerful and if our heavenly father hears our prayers even though we can't see him then why wouldn't we want to walk with God?

Sometimes the summer can be a great time to restore our regular walk with God to go rambling with God. Perhaps sometimes it can be a difficult time as we are out of routine but let's build our spiritual endurance by following Enos' example of living by faith.

Finally Noah. Now Noah had no insight into the future apart from what God's word revealed about the future. Let me read from verse seven.

[21 : 06] By faith Noah being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

Noah took God at his word. There was no flood risk in sight yet he laboured away on dry land building a huge boat almost 140 metres long.

That's about the same length as the Royal Navy's latest class of frigate the Type 26 frigate. His neighbours probably must have thought him completely mad.

They probably laughed at him and his family. For this was no mere weekend of DIY this would have taken him and his family years to build.

He devoted his life and his livelihood to obeying God and trusting God's plan of salvation over whatever else he could be doing in the world.

[22 : 10] But when the flood came the world stood condemned and Noah became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. Like Abel and like Enoch he too was commended by God.

Noah had an assurance of things hopeful the conviction of things not seen. He couldn't see the coming judgment when he started building but he took God at his word and in reverent fear he shaped his life around that future reality even though it was invisible.

So that's living faith recorded for our encouragement and to build our endurance. Abel tells us how we must start the Christian life trusting only in Jesus sacrifice for us not in our own performance.

Enoch reminds us to keep walking with God enjoying our relationship with him as we read our Bibles and pray to him traveling on God's not our own path.

And Noah reminds us to take whatever steps we must to obey God regardless of what the world thinks focused on the reality of God's future judgment trusting in God's only means of rescue from that judgment the death of Jesus on the cross.

[23 : 40] God's So our spiritual endurance building gym sessions have started we've got to have faith because we've got to have endurance for the race set before us let's pray together our eternal reward and we ask it in Jesus name Amen Amen