

# Something Better Provided

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[ 0 : 00 ] And you may like to have open the Bibles at page 977, a passage from Hebrews 11 that was read for us before, and as I said at the beginning, this is continuing our sermon series on the letter to the Hebrews.

A major crisis looms, and the person's response is, I've got faith it'll be okay. They're facing an operation or illness. I've got faith it'll be okay.

The nation goes to war. I've got faith it'll be okay. Well, how often have you heard that? I've heard that sort of statement dozens and dozens of times.

Is it an expression of Christian faith, or is it just a sort of naive optimism that somehow tomorrow will be better than today? The readers of this letter originally were in danger of drifting from Christian faith.

They were faith drifters. And we've seen in recent months through this series, warnings given to them not to drift back in chapter 2. Therefore, we must pay greater attention to what we've heard so that we do not drift away from it.

[ 1 : 15 ] And then in chapter 3, a fairly strong warning. Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

The danger the readers faced was that they would turn away from God because of an unbelieving heart, a heart without faith. We know that they started well in their Christian life full of faith.

We saw that last week in particular in chapter 10. The writer urges them in verse 32 of chapter 10 to recall those earlier days, days when, as he goes on to say, after you'd become Christians or been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with suffering, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

You had compassion on those who were in prison and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions. They'd started well with Christian faith, even faith in the midst of opposition or abuse, their goods being plundered and prison.

But they were in danger of abandoning that faith or confidence. Chapter 10, verse 35 went on to say, don't therefore abandon that confidence of yours, it brings a great reward.

[ 2 : 30 ] And then at the very end of chapter 10, with a warm encouragement to his readers, he says, we're not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.

But what is faith? Is Christian faith just an optimism that things will turn out for the good, that we're always to look on the bright side of life, to quote a Monty Python song?

Or is it something a little bit different from that? Well, chapter 11 begins with a sort of definition of Christian faith. We could define Christian faith all sorts of ways.

This is one definition for these particular readers. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Notice the emphasis there on something solid. That is assurance and it is conviction. That is, Christian faith is not wishful thinking, hoping somehow that tomorrow will be warm and sunny.

[ 3 : 39 ] Christian faith is full of assurance and conviction. Notice too, that it is future in its orientation.

It is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, or not even yet seen. That is, Christian faith is oriented to the future and it is convinced and assured that some aspects of the future that are promised will indeed one day be realised.

It is assurance and conviction, not wishful thinking, not blind or naive optimism. It's not just the cheery disposition that somehow life will be okay.

But the writer's not interested really in abstract definitions. He's not writing to readers to say, here is a sort of philosophical, theological, abstract definition of faith.

It is the conviction of assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. He goes on immediately to give a string of examples of people with faith, showing how their faith influenced their daily life.

[ 4 : 55 ] And all of that by way of motivation to his readers that they too are people of practical faith, not an abstract faith, not a faith that just sort of sits up here in the head and says, yes, I believe all these sorts of things.

But a Christian faith that fleshes itself out day by day in Christian life and living in this world. And so what follows is sort of like an Old Testament hall of faith, rather than hall of fame, is the heroes of faith.

It's not a complete list in some respects. The writer just starts at the beginning of the gallery of hall of faith. And by the time you get late in the chapter, he realizes that he could be writing a whole new Old Testament all over again.

So he says, and he strings together a few more names at the end, but there's a whole lot more that he could have said. These examples are to motivate us in Christian faith and Christian life.

And just like if you're like me, you like to read a good biography from time to time and sometimes a biography or autobiography is absolutely inspiring. And at the end of the book, you think, yeah, I want to live to the full.

[ 6 : 00 ] I want to do 10 times as much as I'm doing in my life. And I want to keep going in my life. Sometimes biographies have that effect. There's a sense in which these little pen portraits, so to speak, of the Old Testament hall of faith is to motivate us on in our Christian life.

But it's more than just an inspiring story. It's God's inspired examples for us, to motivate us to keep on in Christian faith and life.

Now, one of the first things we find in this list is that those who exemplify faith in the God of the Bible don't always have it easy. Faith doesn't guarantee a pain-free, suffering-free, struggle-free, easy life at all.

Take Abel, verse 4. Abel is the second generation of people, the son of Adam and Eve, and an older brother, Cain. We're told here that by faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's.

The story occurs in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in chapter 4. So it's very, very early on in the story of the Bible. What's the result of Abel's faithful sacrifice?

[ 7 : 14 ] God blesses him abundantly, lots of crops, lots of animals, riches and wealth, by comparison to his faithless brother? Not at all. Abel offered a faithful sacrifice, his brother didn't, and the result?

Abel is murdered. Well, that's not particularly a good sort of sales pitch for saying you should have faith. And so often in our world, we think that somehow faith will bring rewards and prosperity or ease or immediate relief or something like that.

The very first example, Abel, because of his faith, is killed by his brother. But more than that, Abel, though dead, through his faith, still speaks, the end of verse 4 says.

There's an implication there, not only that the example of Abel still speaks to us, though it does, to encourage us to have faith, but the implication is that Abel still speaks, still lives, that death for him was not the end.

And so that even though as a result of his faith he died, we are still being commended for faith because beyond death is the promised eternal life of God.

[ 8 : 34 ] Now the next example is quite different. Enoch. We jump one chapter in the Old Testament, Genesis chapter 5. Enoch's one of a list of generations that follow on from Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and so on.

Enoch's an odd one because he didn't die at all. He was just taken up to heaven because of his faithfulness and his walk with God. One of only two people in the Old Testament for whom that happened, Elijah the prophet being the other.

So on the one hand, a faithful person, Abel, is killed. On the other hand, a faithful Enoch doesn't die at all and is taken up to be with God. Unfair?

Some might say. You see, there's no clear path that faith leads us. There are the occasional examples of an Enoch. But probably more often than not, the path is a path of Abel.

That faithfulness to God, faith in God, leads us down hard roads, not pain-free roads. Now, faith also heeds God's word despite circumstance.

[ 9 : 44 ] That's one of the other characteristics in this chapter about faith. So if you look around the world and society and friends and family and neighbours, the values, the priorities that they might have and exhibit might encourage you to take one path of action.

But God's word might say something quite different. And faith in God will take God's path even if it is risky, even if it brings ridicule or mockery from the world.

Take Noah, the man of the flood. We're now moved on again, another chapter in the book of Genesis, Genesis 6 through to chapter 9. Still very early on in the Old Testament. Now, Noah heard God's word about building an ark.

What a strange thing to do. The sun's shining, he's in dry land, everybody around him is sort of getting on with their life. We know that Noah faced some mockery, ridicule, or taunt from neighbours as he was building an ark saying God's going to send a flood on this world.

What an idiot they all thought of him. But heeding God's word despite the circumstances around him and the values, priorities, and speech of the people around him, Noah's faith exemplified itself in heeding God's word, in obeying God's word, and building an ark.

[ 11 : 04 ] And we know the outcome of the story because God's word comes true. The flood came down, the ark saved Noah and his family, and everybody else perished. Similarly with Abraham, the next of the examples really, from verse 8 onwards, Abraham gets more attention in this section.

He's perhaps the great hero of the Old Testament. So some aspects of Abraham's life are dealt with in the verses 8 through to about 20 or so. Abraham was called by God to go to a foreign land, plucked out of the blue, from Mesopotamia to go in the end to the land of Canaan.

But when he set out to obey God's command, trusting God's command and promise, Abraham didn't even know where he was headed. He just sort of headed in the direction that God pointed him and when he got to the land of Canaan, later in chapter 12, God said, this is it.

You're here. There's faith. Again, like Noah, faith that is exemplified in obedience. Noah built the ark, Abraham goes.

But faith that doesn't know the destination, really. And faith that doesn't quite fit in the culture of the world. Faith that looks quite odd or ridiculous, that incurs ridicule, that doesn't actually seem quite reasonable, building an ark, going to a foreign land.

[ 12 : 32 ] But faith, nonetheless, that trusts God's word and God, of course, keeps his word and therefore faith is ultimately rewarded. Now, the next little snippet of Abraham's example comes in verse 11.

Abraham's an old man. His wife is barren. They have no children. And one of the promises God made to Abraham in Genesis 12 and reiterates in chapter 15, which these verses particularly refer back to, was that Abraham would be the father of many people.

Many nations would come from him. Well, again, what a ridiculous promise. To all human appearance, it looks as though it's complete folly. How can an old couple, barren, have one child, let alone, be the father of a multitude of nations?

But Abraham, in Genesis 15, trusts God's promise. Despite the circumstances of his life, despite it looking to be, humanly speaking, completely unreasonable to trust that promise.

And of course, the promise comes true. Verse 11, by faith Abraham received the power of procreation, even though he's too old and Sarah herself was barren, because Abraham considered him faithful who'd promised.

[ 13 : 45 ] He trusts God's word. Ridiculous though it may appear, he knows that God is trustworthy and therefore, he'll trust him no matter what. And verse 12 says, therefore, from one person and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Exactly the words that were promised and by the time the writer writes this letter to the Hebrews, words that had been fulfilled. Because Abraham had become the father of many nations, not just the Jewish nation, but the father of Christians of all nations.

And so the writers can see that God, despite a ridiculous promise, has kept his promise and Abraham had had faith in that promise. See, faith, Christian faith, trusts the words of God regardless of what the world thinks.

Even when the words of God seem to be unreasonable, impossible, unbelievable, incredible, Christian faith, Christian faith, trusts the words of God and the promise of God.

Now for Abraham, he didn't see the fruition of all of the promises. He had a child, he had grandchildren, he didn't see the multitudes and multitudes that flowed from that before he died. He didn't see the full settlement in the promised land.

[ 15 : 06 ] He didn't see the heavenly city to which he looked forward to. He died without seeing the full fruition or realisation of the promises of God. But that doesn't matter because the writer here is saying that the example of Abraham, which is an example for us to follow, is a faith to the end of our life and that beyond life, as for Abel, who still speaks, the full, glorious reality of the promises of God still stand.

We'll come back to that at the end of the chapter in verse 39 and 40 of this chapter as well. Well, having received a son, Abraham was then told in Genesis 22 to sacrifice him.

Again, an astonishing if bizarre command from God. But because Abraham had faith and trust in God's word, ridiculous though it looked because his one son Isaac was meant to be the one through whom the promises of all the nations would come, Abraham was prepared to trust God.

And so we read here about him, verse 17, by faith Abraham, when put to the test, Genesis 22, offered up Isaac. Though, of course, if you know the story, you know that in the end Isaac didn't die because just before Abraham was to put him to death, God intervened.

He tested Abraham's faith. He knew that Abraham's faith meant that he obeyed God even when it was such a hard thing to do. And so Isaac's life was spared.

[ 16 : 35 ] And a ram was provided to be killed in its place. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he'd been told it is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.

He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead, figuratively speaking. And he received him back. We'll jump a couple of generations.

The great grandson of Abraham. His name was Joseph. He didn't even live in the land that was promised in his adult life. Because if you know the story of Joseph and his Technicolor Dreamcoat, as Lloyd Webber called it, Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, is sold into slavery.

He ends up in Egypt in prison at one point, but ultimately rising to be the Prime Minister in Egypt.

There his family come to join him in the midst of famine and drought back in the land of Canaan.

And there Joseph dies. But just at the end of his life, before he dies, knowing that he's dying, he says to his brothers and family, don't bury me here.

[ 17 : 38 ] Embalm me. Put me in a coffin, in effect. But keep my body ready to be buried back in the land. Why? Well, the reference is back to the last chapter of the book of Genesis, Genesis 50, where those events occur.

because Joseph trusted God's promise that the land would one day belong to the descendants of Abraham. Didn't look like it at the time of his death, but he hadn't given up on the promise.

So despite circumstance, he trusted God's word implicitly. And so the reality is, as the Old Testament tells us, the body stayed there 400 years later when the people finally left Egypt through the Red Sea into the Promised Land.

They carried with them the coffin of Joseph. And there, under the leadership of Joshua, the successor of Moses, once they entered the land in Shechem, in the centre of the land, the place where God said to Abraham, this is your land, Joseph was buried.

The site is marked to this day, although it was destroyed recently in the fighting between Palestinians and Israelis. Well, now we move into the next book of the Old Testament, book two out of 66.

[ 18 : 49 ] It's now the time of Moses, 400 years after Joseph. And the similar themes recur. Faith in God is risky, sometimes dangerous, humanly speaking.

Faith in God is sometimes counter-cultural, doesn't fit what the world around you is wanting or believing or valuing. And faith in God often brings suffering and abuse.

So Moses, born under threat because the Pharaoh was trying to kill all the Hebrew babies, the beginning of the book of Exodus. His parents disobeyed the command and preserved his life at least for a little while.

And then through the intervention of God, Moses ironically is brought up in the court of Pharaoh himself under Pharaoh's daughter. Brought up as an Egyptian. Moses is an Egyptian name.

But Moses shunned the Egyptian life, the allure of wealth that he could have had in the palace of Pharaoh, the stability, security, and safety that could have been his as an Egyptian.

[ 19 : 55 ] He shunned all that. He knew that he belonged to the people of God, the Israelites or the Hebrews. And so he identified with them, a risky thing to do. But that was because he trusted the promises of God and not the rule of Pharaoh.

And even though it appeared in his early days that Pharaoh ruled large in Egypt and did indeed, he trusted God and God's promises.

And so we're told here in verse 24, by faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt for he was looking ahead to the reward. Well, the treasures of Egypt were great. If you ever, you've been to some of the ancient museums in Europe, you'll see the wealth of ancient Egypt in them.

Moses could have enjoyed that for the rest of his life. But he turned his back on it, trusting rather God's promise. A risky thing to do. It led to him fleeing from Egypt into Midian in Exodus chapter 2.

[ 21 : 07 ] Then confronting the Pharaoh in later chapters, ultimately leading the people of God out from Egypt. Egypt. That's the example of faith in God that is being commended to the readers of this letter and to us.

Faith that trusts God despite the world circumstances, despite the values, despite the human rulers of this world, despite what people think is sane and sensible.

Faith often takes risks. Faith cops the abuse, mockery, persecution, maybe like able death.

And so for Moses, the ill treatment, but shunning the fleeting pleasures of sin. Looking forward to the glory of Christ, valuing that higher than the wealth of Egypt and Pharaoh.

The readers of this letter were in danger of giving up their faith. They'd started well, they'd suffered abuse, but under its relenting pressure or the attractions of the world, it seems they were in real danger of drifting, to giving up, tired, weary, beaten perhaps, by the pressures of the world in which they lived.

[ 22 : 21 ] Perhaps they'd been praying for God's vindication, for an end to the opposition and persecution, but day by day it kept up its unrelenting pressure. Christian faith runs against the world in which we live.

We may not know the pressures, persecution, of the original readers of this letter here in affluent Australia where we're so comfortable. Our world says, seize the day.

Carpe diem was the expression in the Dead Poets Society film. Enjoy life today. Be tempted. Have fun. It's okay to have a bit of sort of so-called fun in bed on the side.

That's what our society thinks. It almost praises those who do it unless it's against their best friend like footballers have found out. The allure of sexual temptation, that's what our society thinks a bit of fun.

Indulge yourself. No, says Christian faith. Sin's pleasures are real but fleeting. the glory of God promised as our eternal reward is worth the weight.

[ 23 : 32 ] And Christian faith, you see, therefore impacts what we do every minute of the day.

When we're faced with a temptation to do something wrong but pleasurable, Christian faith shuns it and puts it aside and says, no, that's wrong.

The pleasures of heaven await me and I'll wait for them. That's a glory worth waiting for and worth obeying God for even if my world tells me I'm being ludicrous.

But the same sort of teaching somehow pervades churches from time to time. Sometimes in churches we hear it taught that if we pray God will bring us healing and restoration and a new job and ease of life and some prosperity of some sort.

We should expect sometimes we're told answered prayers right now here on earth. But the scriptures throughout testifies, this passage testifies, that Christian faith is often the hard road, the suffering road, the difficult road, the road of self-denial, the road of frustration, of abuse, danger or death.

We don't know much of that in Australia as I say. Though I think the opposition to Christian faith is increasing each year and ironically has significantly increased since September 11.

[ 25 : 01 ] Don't be conned by the attractions of our world. Christian faith looks for the glory and joy that lasts forever, that belongs in the heavenly Zion city and not the fleeting pleasures here on earth

or its wealth.

So Moses shunned the fleeting pleasures of sin, he shunned the wealth of Pharaoh looking to the glory of the Christ and the heavenly reward as verse 26 says.

Sometimes people say that Christian faith is just blind, blind faith. You're just jumping in the dark.

We don't know anything and what on earth are you doing placing faith in what you don't know.

But throughout this chapter it's intriguing how often the language of looking and seeing and beholding occurs. Because Christian faith is so sure and certain, so convinced and assured that it's as though we see ahead of us beyond our life on earth the glories of heaven beckoning like a light at the end of the tunnel.

Christian faith actually perceives and sees and so Abraham and Moses and others in this chapter it's as though they can see the one who's invisible as though they can behold the glories that await them and they actually go out to welcome and greet them is language that's used in this chapter.

[ 26 : 22 ] You see trusting God's word accompanies with it almost envisaging its fulfillment the attraction that is drawing us on and helping us persevere in our Christian life day by day.

Well the writer spends a bit of time with Abraham and Moses and now he realizes that he could just repeat the whole of the Old Testament by way of example but he doesn't and so from verse 29 he rushes through the people of Israel leaving Egypt through the Red Sea the exercise of conquering the land when Jericho's walls fell down blowing trumpets if you will which army ever goes around a city to blow trumpets to defeat it you get your tanks and your artillery but no they trusted God's word and Jericho fell and so he moves on to just list some of the names that follow in the next section of the Old Testament from the book of Joshua into the book of Judges and so he mentions Gideon Barak Samson and Jephthah and moves from the Judges into the period of the kings David the second king a great king and Samuel the prophet that led up to him and he lists some of the great achievements that these people of faith had this is more of a sales pitch surely for faith through faith they conquered kingdoms administered justice obtained promises shut the mouths of lions Daniel that is quenched raging fire escaped the edge of the sword one strength out of weakness became mighty in war put foreign armies to flight women received their dead by resurrection in this time of Elijah and Elisha that is others were taught and that looks great and maybe too often we think that faith is going to bring us those sorts of daily victories on earth but keep reading because it's not all like that you see for others who were faithful they were tortured refusing to accept release in order to obtain a better resurrection others suffered mocking and flogging chains imprisonment stone to death sawn in two killed by the sword they went about in skins of sheep and goats destitute persecuted tormented of whom the world was not worthy they wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground that doesn't sound like the sort of sales pitch that would encourage anyone to have Christian faith but it's the reality you see on the one hand you've got somebody back in verse 34 who escapes death by the sword in verse 37 somebody who's killed by the sword Christian faith could lead either way but the point is that we're to trust God whatever the circumstances whatever the risks and it may lead us to some liberation and relief but it may not but if it doesn't that's not because it's not faith and it's not because

God is absent or impotent but the path of faith whichever way it leads in this life good or ill or a bit of both ultimately leads beyond death to the heavenly glory and that is its goal and that is what matters in the end Christian faith is about laying hold of the promises of heaven wherever that path leads in life whatever abuse torture destitution opposition mockery ridicule is incurred and it does and it will but whatever triumphs or relief God in his mercy brings as well Christian faith makes daily differences in our lives we're faced with choices all the time confronted with decisions this way or that way God's way or the world's way and Christian faith says I will find my security in God not in my bank balance or my investment portfolio

Christian faith says I will give generously even if I'm not sure where the next money is coming from because that is God's command and I'll obey it in faith Christian faith will shun the fleeting pleasures of sin the temptations that our TV screen our adverts our billboards throw at us all the time or our friends try and distract us with it says I'm not going to have sexual yield to sexual temptation I'm looking forward to the pleasures of heaven I'm not going to gamble away with things I'm going to be a responsible steward because that's what God wants me to do I'm not going to fall for greed and covetousness in this world because the wealth of this world is nothing compared to the glories of Christ which my eyes are fixed and focused on I'm not going to give in under the opposition or the ridicule of people but obeying God's command I'm going to share my faith with those who are not

Christians I might lose my friends I may lose my family but God's command will be obeyed because I trust God's word and the eternal friendships that I'll make in heaven will be worth anything greater far greater than anything I might lose here on earth I will strive for the prize of the heavenly crown rather than being distracted by earthly recognition or reward that's where Christian faith hits the road day by day every day we make decisions about ourselves and our activity and this [ 31 : 19 ] Old Testament hall of faith is here to motivate us to persevere not to give up under pressure not to fall for the attractions of this world we may well have started well in our Christian faith but the point is will we finish well and finally arrive at the gates of God's heavenly city and the eternal joys that are contained within now well you might say in response to all of this I wish I had this sort of faith of Abraham and Moses I wish I had that much faith my friends it's not about the amount of faith it's about the object of faith it's not about having this much or this much faith it's about what you put your faith in put it in something stupid your faith will come undone no matter how much faith you've got if the frozen lake is just so thin you may have lots of faith but if you go ice skating on it you'll fall in the object of faith is what matters not the amount and the object of faith here is the Lord Jesus

Christ that is why faith is assurance and conviction not blind wishful thinking or naive optimism it's because of Jesus that we can be so sure and certain because as this whole letter has told us in such detail so far Jesus by dying the perfect sacrifice for us so that we're not only forgiven but perfected in God's presence and has risen and ascended to heaven and he's laid an anchor in heaven in the presence of God for our soul there we are secured by him and that's why Christian faith on earth is sure and certain convinced and convicted of the truth because the anchors placed in heaven already by Jesus he's the object of faith so a minuscule amount of faith in him will bring us assurance for eternity that that heaven is our destiny notice here the big picture of God Christian faith is not about little promises and little prayers it's about the big picture that God has brought us to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ through Jesus death and resurrection and ascension for us and that our destiny is in heaven where the anchor has been set for our souls for eternity Abraham saw the big picture he wasn't concerned about one child or a little bit of land he looked forward to the glorious heavenly city so did Moses as we saw in verses 24 to 26 that big picture is secured by Jesus Christ that's why this chapter began by saying faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen we can be assured and we can be convinced because of Jesus dying rising and ascending to heaven for us as verse 6 in this chapter says without faith it is impossible to please God for whoever would approach

God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him and how do we approach God well we saw that recently look across to chapter 10 verse 22 let us approach God with a true heart in full assurance of faith faith that is directed to Jesus Christ his death resurrection and ascension for us Amen m brz listen to Jesus that he went to Jesus the Lord to Jesus assist us through Jesus I give us to Jesus the Lord and all that he eventually are going to Jesus in if