

What Faith Sees

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads for prayer. Lord and God, you have drawn near to us.

We pray now that by your spirit we would draw near to you. We ask this in your name. Amen. Well now, I know the reading was printed in the sheet, but if you would take the Bibles, the RSVs that are in the seats, and turn to Hebrews 10 and 11, page 209 near the back.

And as you're finding your place, I want to say, if you're with us for the first time today, you've joined us at an extraordinary point in the life of St. John's.

Because as a whole church, next week, we're going to be up and moving to a different location. And that explains something of why everything's so clean today.

There was a crew yesterday, cleaning extra spick and span, leaving everything in perfect condition for those who will take up possession here.

[1 : 17] And we'll gather here next Sunday, 10 o'clock, 8.10, and our evening service. And then at the end, we will leave our buildings at the end of the 10 o'clock, go over to the Oak Ridge Adventist Church at 37th and Bailey.

And from September 25th onwards, we'll be guests of the Oak Ridge Assembly Church. And if you're anything like me, it's a bit of a roller coaster of feelings right now.

There's going to be a lot to get used to. But underneath it, of course, is the fact that the best way for us to demonstrate the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ is that for a time, we need to be refugees as a Christian community.

We're not the first Christian community to go through something like this, of course. God has given us the great privilege of having to make a genuine sacrifice for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

To do something that's counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, and just a little crazy if this world is all that there is. To choose to allow our buildings to be confiscated because of something that is invisible and something that is future.

[2 : 42] To say it's better to lose something that's precious and valuable to us for something that is more precious and infinitely valuable. My hope is that we so are giving witness to what we believe, that the truth of God's word and that God's approval is more important than anything else and that we're willing to act and that we're willing to let go of something.

And I've thought hard about which part of God's word we ought to look at in our transition. And in one sense, it doesn't really matter because God speaks from wherever we open his word. But I've wanted to look at Hebrews 11 and the chapters around it which are the key chapters in the Bible on faith.

And faith in Hebrews is not beginning faith, how we come into the life of being a Christian. Faith here is the principle of the continual enjoyment of the Christian life.

In other words, these chapters are not about how we start Christian faith. They're about continuing, persevering, enduring Christian faith until we die. The question of these chapters is not, did you once believe?

It's not even, are you a believer now? It's, will you believe to the end? Will you be a believer when you die? And I hope you can see how immediately relevant this is because the book is written to a group of Christians probably in Rome who've already suffered and now they're facing more uncertainty, more insecurity and more suffering.

[4 : 25] In fact, they've got two pressures on them. The first is they're facing suffering. Look back at chapter 10 verses 32 please. Recall the former days, he says to them, when after you were enlightened you endured a hard struggle with suffering, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction and sometimes being treated as partners with those so treated.

Soon after they had become Christians, they had endured hard struggling and affliction and they had been publicly humiliated.

They had taken the very risky track of identifying with those who'd been imprisoned for the faith. Look at verse 34. You had compassion on the prisoners.

You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and abiding one.

It's an amazing verse. They had joyfully accepted the confiscation, the word means, the plundering, their buildings, their homes, their possessions, all of them, wrongly, brutally, confiscated.

[5 : 44] They'd suffered a terrible injustice and they had joyfully accepted this confiscation. It's amazing. They didn't just endure the theft and get over it.

They accepted it. And they didn't just accept it. They joyfully accepted it. Why? Because they knew they had a better possession and an abiding one.

He's speaking about the certain hope of the life to come. They had acted on Jesus' words where he says, Blessed are you when people say all kinds of evil about you on my account.

Rejoice and be glad for your reward in heaven is great. So, they had believed the words of Jesus and the truth of the life to come so they held their possessions in an open hand and they could lose their real estate, their entire real estate and it not devastate them because their real estate was temporary compared to the real estate of heaven.

But this Christian community, they had lost their property once and now they are having to face suffering again. Verse 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward for you have need of endurance so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

[7 : 13] Terrible to begin well as a Christian and then to fall in the middle. to shrink back after going forward. To be so tempted by this world that when faced with inconvenience and genuine suffering to say I am now very comfortable, I've paid my dues, I've served my time.

Since Genesis chapter 3 Satan has wanted us to focus all our energies just on now. to put all our eggs in this life to make comfort and settling down our great aim not pressing forward to the heavenly city but the righteous live by faith.

So that's the first pressure they're under, suffering. But they're also under the pressure of shame. Just keep your finger there at the beginning of 11 and turn over to chapter 12 verse 2.

It's all part of the same section. He says, Looking to Jesus, we look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Now all suffering is suffering but suffering for Jesus Christ has a special edge to it and the edge is that we are made to feel ashamed.

[8 : 48] Every faithful Christian knows what it is to face the reproach or disgrace when it comes to following Jesus Christ. I mean, if you hold the Bible as true biblical standards, if you declare yourself clearly, it doesn't matter what realm of life it is, you will be shamed and you will be tempted to be ashamed.

As one commentator says, if physical suffering has slayed its hundreds, shame has slayed its thousands. and the great danger in the book of Hebrews is shrinking back, taking a position of safety and comfort.

Look at verse 38, please, back in chapter 10. Quoting from the Old Testament, God says, My righteous one shall live by faith and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls. We know from earlier in Hebrews that there are some in the congregation who have drifted away.

In the face of increasing difficulty and suffering for their faith, they have been tempted to hide their faith, tempted by what was comfortable, what was visible, what was tangible. It just became too embarrassing to follow Jesus in Rome.

[10 : 15] So they began to shrink back and the writer says, that's the path of destruction. You gradually stop living on the basis of the promises of God and many who begin drifting end up deserting because you can gain the whole world and lose your eternal soul.

And underneath it all is an unbelieving heart. Take care, he says in chapter 3, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God.

Who is the one who takes, who is the one God takes pleasure in? What is the opposite of shrinking back and being destroyed? What is the remedy for desertion and drifting?

The answer, faith. And you may think that's far too simple and a bit of an anticlimax, but it's this faith that Hebrews chapter 11 speaks about.

And this wonderful chapter gives us a picture of faith which is not academic and it's not abstract and intellectual. It's like a YouTube of examples of faith in the lives of those who've gone before.

[11 : 32] They're not heroes, they're just those who've believed to the end. And today, this week, we're just going to focus on verses 1 to 3 and one illustration from the rest of the chapter and next week, we're going to look a bit more at the heavenly city.

So what is the true character of Christian faith? How does it actually work? And I've got to say, we've always got to say this when we're talking about faith.

Faith is not a natural human quality that some lucky people are born with. You know, some people are born sceptical, others are born gullible. It's not a human virtue that we work hard to produce in ourselves.

It's a human response to the word of God. Look at verse 1. Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

So faith links us to two things. The invisible Lord, the conviction of things not seen, and the future world, the assurance of things hoped for.

[12 : 44] Faith deals with two realms, the unseen, the invisible, what's beyond human sight because faith deals with God himself. And secondly, the future.

No human can predict the future. God alone holds the future and he reveals it in his word and he makes promises about our future and faith is taking those promises and acting as though they are true now, taking God at his word.

You can know nothing about the invisible God or your personal future except God speaks. But when he speaks, faith receives assurance and conviction of what he says.

Look at verse 6. It says the same thing in a different way. Without faith it's impossible to please God for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards him who seeks him.

Exactly the same two convictions as verse 1. The invisible, we have to believe that God exists because the great unseen reality that faith deals with is God himself.

[13 : 51] And the future, well it's based on God's character and it gives me the assurance of the future that he will reward us. It's not just that God is big and powerful and mighty and can do it but that he's good and he will keep his promises.

And because I know God and because I know his character I have conviction and I seek him. Well look at verse 3. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God so that what is seen, what was made out of things which are invisible literally.

just picture this. If I draw two circles in the air here, on this side is the world, the whole world, and on this side is the word of God.

Okay? The question the writer is asking us is this, which forms the other? Which governs the other? Which depends on which?

you don't have to live in Vancouver long to know the dominant view is that it's this world that's the ultimate reality. This world and my experiences and my desires, they are far more important than the word of God.

[15 : 11] In fact, this world believes that we create gods, that the story of humanity is in the beginning, mankind began a very big search, that we cannot really be certain of anything, there's no right or wrong, there's just our human preferences and the great search for meaning arises from within our world and the future is in our hands to create.

Well, just keep your finger in Hebrews 11 and go back to the first verse of the book for a moment, please. Turn back to Hebrews 1. This is how the book begins.

In many and various ways, God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a son.

That's where the book begins and all of the rest of the book of Hebrews rests on that claim that God has spoken decisively, definitively, finely and perfectly in the person of his son.

So you cannot have Hebrews 11 apart from chapter 1. We can only live by faith because God has spoken. Apart from God's word, if God hadn't spoken, faith is just gullibility and wishful thinking.

[16 : 41] But if you have faith, you believe that this world was created by the word, that this world is governed by the word of God, and that the meaning of the world is not found in the world but in the word of God.

You evaluate the world by the word and not the other way around. You evaluate the future, not in light of the present, but the present in the light of the future, which doesn't mean we're not interested in the present.

I've never preached Hebrews 11 before. It's been shocking to me this week to see how relevant it is. I want to say to you this is exactly what the Anglican Troubles of the last ten years have been about.

Is our faith going to be governed by the world or by the word? Are we going to be conformed to the world or to the word?

Did Jesus or did Jesus not say, heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away? And if you seek God, here's the thing, God will make demands on your faith.

[17 : 50] And you and I, we can only enjoy the benefits of faith if we obey and if we endure and along the way God makes demands on our faith. That's how we know it's real faith.

And sometimes the demands God makes on us just seem silly, particularly if this world is your main reference point. I mean, the writer gives the illustration in verse 30 of Jericho, the walls of Jericho. God told the Old Testament people of Israel to march around the wall seven times in seven days and then he brought the wall down. The wall didn't fall down because of the heavy stomping.

It wasn't their obedience that brought the wall down. It was God who did it. But the way he did it was by making a demand that seemed very strange. change. This is very different than so much passive North American Christianity, Christianity in the West.

It treats faith as a kind of insurance policy. You know, you just believe one day, then you put it away in your safe deposit box and take it out when the will is read. In the meantime, settle back, live as comfortably as possible, chasing exactly the same things that our neighbours chase, believing that now is the only important thing that God's promises are irrelevant.

[19 : 13] But God does not just demand initial faith and nor does he just demand occasional bursts of faith but ongoing persistent faith until the end. And I want to look at one illustration in this chapter and here's Moses.

So if you turn over to chapter 11 verse 24, let's start there. By faith, Moses, verse 24, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

To live by faith means you can't have it all now. If we live by the invisible God and his future promises, it means we will come to a point in our life where we have to choose to sacrifice certain things in this life.

Well, you can't have what God is offering you unless you let go of something else. This decision was the decision that faced Moses and it's very difficult for us to imagine the place of privilege and affluence he had.

He was raised by Pharaoh's daughter in the courts of Pharaoh when Egypt was way more superpower-ish than any superpower today. He had access to every physical pleasure, no questions asked.

[20 : 47] He had a lifestyle that was beyond secure, status, financial, etc. But he came to the place where he recognised that to be obedient to what faith demanded, he had to let something go.

He had to say no to something and yes to something else. Or as it said in verse 24, he refused one thing and chose another. And he had to make the decisive choice to give up all the power and all the pleasure so that he could identify with the people of God which would mean one thing and that is he lost all this and shared their mistreatment.

Question, did he make the right decision? Imagine you're a court appointed consultant to Moses. And Moses comes to see you for advice, tells you the situation.

Surely you'd say to him the smart thing to do, Moses, would be keep quiet about your faith. Stay where you are in Pharaoh's court. You could use your power and your connections.

You could do far more for Israel and the people of God if you remain in Pharaoh's court and keep quiet about your faith. I mean it's a no-brainer, isn't it? Israel are slaves.

[22 : 03] They're captives. They have no power. They have no wealth. It's a losing cause for heaven's sake. To declare yourself and identify yourself with them will just mean abuse.

You'll lose all your prospect of wealth and promotion and power. Moses, look, this world is all there is. It's a ridiculous stupid decision. But he deliberately chose to be mistreated with the people of God than to have all the pleasures of sin.

I've always found that a very helpful phrase, the pleasures of sin, at this point in the Bible because the Bible is wonderfully frank and realistic about the fact that sin is pleasurable. We enjoy it when we indulge ourselves at other people's expense.

You look carefully at the text, it says the fleeting pleasures of sin. literally Moses, Moses let go of having a temporary time of sin because pleasure, sinful pleasure, is momentary, transient and fleeting and in choosing sin for the moment we can lose our souls forever.

today is 9-11, the anniversary. One of the accounts I read of that day this week was from the notes of a journalist hurriedly written in a little blank notebook.

[23 : 27] He lived in an apartment a block or two away from the towers and when the first plane hit he ran out in his sandals and his jeans with this notebook and there was pandemonium and people were screaming and many were injured and he describes how he ran and then walked and walked and walked and walked with only what he had on and his little notebook and he went in and had some money in his pocket and he got some more clothes and then he went on to the bank and he realised that he'd left his notebook back in the clothing store.

Of course he'd left his whole apartment and all his possessions just near the towers. And this is what he wrote in his notebook later that day.

Walking out of the bank I realised I'd left my notebook on the counter in the clothes store. I take off running. When the only thing you have in the world is a red spiral with 12 pages of journal entry and a pair of sneakers, those things take on an extraordinary significance.

So I think that's right. Suddenly his future's changed and when your future changes some things take on an extraordinary significance. So verse 26, Moses considered abuse suffered for the Christ. Greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt because his future changed. He looked the reward. What is it that drives Moses out of the position of power and privilege into the place of privation, suffering and scorn?

[25 : 15] He considered scorn, shame, reproach for the name of Christ, greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt. He makes a very simple calculation and this is the fundamental calculation of faith.

it looks at what the world offers and it looks at what the word offers and if I have to sacrifice one, it's easy because all the wealth and pleasure of Egypt, they are worth less than one hour's abuse for the name of Jesus Christ.

True faith chooses what the world is most afraid of because it knows the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ. One more verse here, by faith Moses left Egypt, verse 27.

He wasn't afraid of the anger of the king for he endured. How did he endure? As seeing him who was invisible. This is how he endured.

He looked to God. It was a matter of his vision. That's why I call this sermon, What Faith Sees. The word look is an intense word. It's like an artist who ignores every other distraction so that he can capture this thing.

[26 : 32] Fixed on God. And none of us here will keep walking the path of faith. None of us will endure to the end unless our hopes are founded and based on Jesus Christ.

Because when our hopes are based on him, all the reward, all the great reward lies beyond this world and all it can offer.

So what does this mean? What does it mean for us? Well, I want to go back to the beginning of this whole section and show that there are three ways, three things this means for us, three ways we apply this word to us in chapter 10 verses 19 to 25.

The first is let us draw near. Verse 22. Let us draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

the two convictions that lie at the heart of faith, the invisible God and the future world, do not bring salvation by themselves.

[27 : 49] You can believe both those things and not be a Christian. We have to act on them. We have to have dealings with God. We have to draw near to him.

Drawing near to him is not just prayer. Drawing near is not what happens when you die. Go to be near with God. Drawing near is a wholehearted, ongoing, conscious act of abiding in God.

It's practicing communion with him, deliberate, growing closer, seeking him in everything that we do. This is for all Christians and is particularly true in times of difficulty.

Draw near to God. You will only draw near to God if you have those two basic convictions, that God exists and that he rewards us. But the convictions themselves do not make true faith.

True faith acts on those convictions and approaches God and draws near to him. Remember verse 6? Whoever would draw near to God, that's the key, must believe that he exists and he rewards those who seek him.

[29 : 02] So that the sign you will be in heaven then is that you seek him now. And we draw near with a true heart, not a half-hearted, take-it-or-leave-it heart, bringing conditions with us.

Because faith only transforms us when we draw near to this God. So that's the first application to us. Draw near. Let us draw near. Secondly, let us hold fast, verse 23.

Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. Faith is not true faith until we confess it to others. I mean, if you are convinced about the future, it's just to keep it from others is just not loving.

And thirdly and finally, let us consider, this is applying the word of God to each other in the congregation. Verse 24. Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

This word stir up is very strong. It's provoke, irritate one another, which is not something we find difficult doing. We're meant to irritate one another to love and to good works, not neglecting meeting together.

[30 : 27] Notice please, this is not addressed to the clergy or the leaders in the congregation, but to everyone. It's a call for us to take every opportunity for fellowship.

To come to church or to come to gatherings intentionally praying that you would stir up those around you to love and good works. That's the reason we gather. So that withdrawing from Christian fellowship or keeping our faith hidden from others or keeping our distance and not drawing near to God, if you continue to do that, you will, in five years' time, you will not be a Christian.

That's my experience with people. So cultivate unity, exert yourselves to work to gather others, strive to lift those who are wandering and bring them home.

Well, that's our beginning in this lovely chapter and we're going to come back to it next week and the week after. And I started by saying that if you've joined us, these are extraordinary times.

I was going to use the word exciting, but I thought it doesn't quite cut it. Three questions. My first question is this, is it worth it?

[31 : 48] Why give up the buildings? The answer, I think, depends entirely on whether God has spoken his final word. In Jesus Christ. It depends on whether you're willing to be governed by the world or by the word.

And it depends on whether God can be trusted. Second, how do we come to the place of accepting the confiscation of our buildings joyfully?

I think the answer is somewhere in the calculation that faith makes. That reproach for the name of Christ is worth more than all the world has to offer. And how will we endure to the end?

I think the answer is by drawing near to God, by holding fast our confession, and by not neglecting meeting, stirring each other up to love and good works.

So let's bow our heads for prayer, shall we? Let's take just a moment.

[32 : 55] Let's ask him that the Lord Jesus Christ has drawn near to us and that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Let us draw near to him. And let's ask him that his word would take root in our hearts so that when suffering comes, we would not fall away.

And he would enable us to endure by faith so that the cares and the riches and the pleasures of this life do not choke that faith. That he would grant us believing hearts to hear his word, to hold it fast, and to bear fruit even for Jesus Christ, in his name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.