

The importance of Faith - Discernible Guidance

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[0 : 0 0] chapter, but I think we can get a sense of the chapter from the first few verses. So we're going to read verses 1 through to 10, okay, where we finish with Abraham. So now hear God's word.

Hebrews 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 God exists, and that he rewards those who seek him. 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 commended the world. By this he condemned the world. Sorry, and commended, that would be a that would be a terrible thing to say commended instead of condemned, wouldn't it? He condemned the world and became an heir of righteousness that comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place and was to receive an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. Well, I certainly pray.

If you're able to turn back to Hebrews 11, we'll begin.

This message this evening is very much a follow-on from last Sunday evening's message. In its theme, I was addressing the issue that, you know, how can one message address everybody? And there are some issues that can be addressed in a message that does address everybody at the same time. But it's also true that sometimes some messages can hit particular people, while others, it's good for the storehouse, especially when we have spiritual difficulties. But at the time, we were pretty full, and it just adds to the fullness. But, you know, we're going to need it sometime. And this is the very thing that Proverbs teaches us, isn't it? That we need to store God's word up in our heart, not because we're not full, but because when we hit those moments where we need to rely on reserves, it needs to be there in order for us to do it, in order for that to happen. Well, the message this evening,

[3 : 5 1] I think addresses every single one of us, not one of us is going to be able to escape these issues. But the issues are fairly straightforward. They are encouraging, but they're challenging, not in the sense that we need to confess a sin here. They are challenging in the sense that they are something to respond to. So the message here isn't calling out sin, and therefore our need to repent of it. Rather, it's calling out key things that God does and calling us to respond to it.

If you read Romans 11, two things become immediately clear, or quite clear, I think, in Hebrews chapter 11. It's clearly about faith. It's clearly about the importance of faith.

This is highlighted by the fact that without faith, it's impossible to please God. And it's highlighted by the fact that there's a list of people here who please God by their faith.

By their faith, they are credited righteousness. So the idea that faith is not a main subject or the topic or focus of Hebrews chapter 11, you know, would be a difficult one to make. It's clearly the focus of this chapter, faith. In some cases, you'll notice in verse 32, which we didn't read, but it's worth noticing. Only names are mentioned. The stories behind those names are not mentioned. Now, they clearly could be, because they clearly must be equivalent to everything that we've heard up to this point, Abraham, Noah, Abel. But the names mentioned, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, and so forth. These were people who also acted in faith, but they just have their names mentioned.

But there's also something else here that needs to be noticed, and I'm sure you have already, that faith is the gift that causes people to be guided to do certain things. Let me say that again.

[5 : 55] Faith is the gift of God that causes God's people to be guided to do certain things. Noah built an ark in faith. Abel did his offering in faith. Abraham went out leaving where he was and not knowing even where he was going, and he did all of that in faith. So faith is clearly the gift that guides, or it's clearly the gift, that allows us to be able to discern the guidance of God. Noah built the ark, verse 7, in faith. Abraham left where he lived and followed God, even though he wasn't sure where he was going, verse 8. They all did it in faith, and in verse 32, all of these people mentioned there, they all did what they did in faith. They were guided to do what they did in faith. So as you read this, something should have become apparent to you. Okay? It should have become immediately apparent to you.

That guidance is discerned through faith. That means that no Christian ever, ever, needs to ask God for guidance. You don't need to do it. Because the issue is not God needs to guide.

God is always guiding. God is guiding us all the time. The issue here is whether or not we're noticing it, whether or not we're paying attention to how God is guiding, how God is leading, what God is calling us to do through the different methods that he uses. So here, faith causes these people to do things that God wants them to do, which means that God is guiding them through faith. So faith is how we discern God's guidance. Okay? Faith doesn't cause us to ask for God's guidance. Faith causes us to see that God is guiding. And there's a big difference there. Because sometimes we can say we need to sit down, you need to pray for the will of God. You need to pray for God to guide you. Well, God is already doing that. God is already guiding us. The issue is, is what we really need to pray for is that, help me notice it. Help me notice how you are guiding me so that I can respond to it by walking in the same direction that you want me to go in, rather than you having to send me down back streets and side roads to get me back onto the path that you want me on. Okay? God, to use, to use a, a simple illustration, but I think it's one that you will get. I don't know if you've ever seen ants crawling around on the floor. Okay? And you try not to step on them or not, depending on how gracious you are. You know, you might even go and buy some special powder to put down. Who knows? But, you know, I don't think it's a, it's a sin if you're killing them. But let's just say, for instance, you kept a couple alive and you managed to get one on an A4 sheet of paper. Okay? One on an A4 sheet of paper. Now that ant can wander in any direction that it likes. And let's say that it's wandering away from you. Okay?

There's two ways that you can interfere with the ant in order for it to walk towards you. Number one, pick the ant up and turn it around. Or number two, turn the paper.

Okay? When we deal with God and how God guides, we are like that ant on a big sheet of paper. He doesn't have to touch us. He just has to turn the paper. Okay? And however many times we go in this direction and that direction and the other direction, God is gracious to keep turning that paper to eventually so that we end up exactly where God wants us. Okay? God's guidance is incredibly gentle, which means that, that God is guiding all the time. We need the faith to be able to discern what he's doing or else we're just aimlessly walking around, not knowing where we're going half the time or why we're going there. But God will always get us to where he wants us in the end. Okay? Sometimes we know that God's picked us up and turned us around. But most of the time, he just turns the paper. He just turns everything beneath and around us. So this means, and I'm of full conviction of this, that God is leading every single one of us. Okay? God is guiding every single one of us. Now, it doesn't follow from that that you know it. God is guiding you into tomorrow and everything you will do tomorrow. God is guiding you through this whole year and what will happen through this year. But that doesn't mean that you're able to notice it. You make your own plans to go on holiday where you do. You make your own plans to do the things that you do. And God, okay, God can say, well, that's fine. You go ahead. But this is where you're going to end up. And this is what's going to happen throughout this year. Now, it's one thing to say that's not fair.

[11 : 15] But it's a bit like an ant saying that's not fair to you. The ant's not going to get anywhere. Okay? The ant, you're not going to pay any attention to the ant because you're of supreme power over the ant, only over the ant. Okay? You have supreme control. The ant has none in that scenario.

And it's the same with us with God. But we are to notice how God guides. And guidance is discernible. Some Christians will speak of open doors and closed doors. And they assume that this is one of the ways in which God guides. Well, he does guide that way. But he also guides primarily by his word.

Okay? Abraham followed what God said. Abel followed what God said. David followed what God said. Noah followed what God said. The way that God primarily guides is by speaking to us. That's how God guides.

That's why we need his word. He tells us, he guides us by what he has said. Okay? You can cross the road now. Don't cross the road now. It's not as simple as that. But that's how it works. God guides by speaking.

But God also guides by giving us his spirit. But there are a number other ways in which God guides. Providentially, of course. When you, as an individual, make a decision, or, let's put it slightly a different way, you make a decision on behalf of you and somebody else, or just somebody else, it may be in line with the will of God, or it may not be.

[13 : 01] Now, that doesn't mean that it will be contrary to God's will. But what it means is, is your decision can be contrary to God's will. And something which is contrary to God's will will always be brought back into the path that God has chosen, because his will always trumps ours.

Just because you've prayed it in Jesus' name doesn't mean that it's going to happen. Just because you've asked God to guide you, and that's the third yellow card that's past your house, therefore I'm going to go and be a missionary.

Okay? If you listen to that kind of guidance, you know, just because you've constructed a way of determining how God is guiding you, doesn't mean that God is actually guiding you with those things.

And I know, you know, Christians suffer from this kind of temptation an awful lot. Because we don't know how God guides, we construct ways in order for God to guide us.

One of them would be something like, Lord, if you allow me to see five red cars this morning, then I'll know you're speaking to me to do this. Well, the chances of you actually seeing five red cars in Edinburgh are pretty high.

[14 : 20] You know, I mean, that's not much of a test, is it? More of a test would be, Lord, if I see five giraffes going east, then I know that you want me to do that.

That would be more of a test. That would be something that God could achieve. But five red cars? You're hardly serious about it, are you? So the issue is not constructing your own forms of guidance and asking God to bless that, but being able to notice how God blesses.

Now, God can soften the blow if you make bad decisions, or he can allow you to feel the full force so that you don't go down that road again. Okay? That's one of the ways which God could guide us.

God allows us to feel the full force of every decision we make. Every decision we make. Good or bad.

He can soften them, but we still get to feel them. There are only three ways of learning. Ever. The first is via instruction. The second is via experience.

[15 : 30] Or the third is a combination of both. Okay? Adam and Eve had all three. Don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. For the day you eat of it, you will surely die.

Okay? They had the instruction, which could have led them to life in the garden without death. But then they disobeyed the instruction and then had the experience of the instruction, of the opposite of the instruction, which was death.

And so ultimately, they learned in both ways. One via instruction and the experience that followed, even though they could have avoided the experience and still learned the same lesson.

This means that if God is in control of everything, which he is, he's in control of everything. That means that even your disobedience is under the control of God.

It does not mean that it's consistent with his will. But what it does mean is it's still under God's control. An example of this would be the cross.

[16 : 33] Okay? That the cross is Jesus Christ being put there by the preordained plan of God, but put there by human hands who are disobeying God's word.

Okay? So even these men who are disobeying God in their acts of disobedience were still under the control of God in accordance with God's will. So guidance is being able to determine whether or not I'm in line with God's will.

But you can never be outside of the control of God. Okay? Even disobedient people are within the control of God. Nothing takes God by surprise. He doesn't go, well, I didn't expect you to do that.

Okay? Do you think he was surprised by what Pontius Pilate did? Do you think he was surprised by what the soldiers did to Jesus? Do you think he was surprised when he laid out his plan to deliver Jesus Christ up to the cross that the way that he got there was by the hands of men who were disobeying God?

Do you think God thought, I don't know, I've got no control over them? Of course not. Okay? Even disobedience is under the control of God.

[17 : 43] These are important issues. So as we go through this really quickly and really quite briefly, these are the ways in which God guides.

Firstly, guidance is discernible. Guidance is discernible. God guides first and foremost by speaking.

Abel did what God wanted. Okay? Noah did what God wanted. Abraham did what God wanted. David did what God wanted. Solomon, at the beginning, did what God wanted.

Isaiah, Elijah, many of the others. How did they know? How did they know what to do? Well, God spoke. God spoke.

How does the Christian know how to live? God has spoken. How does the Christian know what to do? How does the Christian know how to undertake his job? Well, God's told him how to do it.

[18 : 40] There's no rocket science here. Another way in which God guides, as I said briefly before, is by his spirit. Okay? Galatians 5 says that we are to keep in step with the spirit.

Okay? The spirit's walking, and we are to have the faith to discern that we are walking with the spirit or walking outside of the spirit. Okay? This doesn't mean that we can ever be separated from the spirit, seeing that we're sealed with him until the day of redemption.

But this is a bit like two people either walking together in the same direction, holding hands, or two people walking in the opposite direction, holding hands. One of the reasons why Christians have a stagnant life is because it's the same reason when you got two people holding hands, walking in the opposite direction.

They don't make progress in either direction. They stay where they are precisely because of the unity and the different direction that they are going in.

Well, it's kind of the same with a Christian being united with God in the spirit. Okay? That kind of grieving of the spirit causes stagnation in the Christian life.

[19 : 48] So here's one of the ways, or another way, other than God's word and his spirit that he guides. He guides through permitting.

Permitting. God tells us that he permits certain things or allows them to happen. As we saw on Wednesday evening in Acts 14, the nations were allowed to go their own way.

God will allow men and women, boys and girls, to go their own way. He permits that to happen. Okay? Okay? Satan was permitted to do X amount of things to Joe.

He gave permission for that to be so. Okay? There's many people in scripture where God permits that to be used.

God has given us freedom, and that freedom allows us to do certain things, which even means that God's people can do bad things. God permits that. God allows that to happen.

[20 : 48] Does he approve of it? Of course not. But does he allow it? All the time. God's will, okay, is discerned through what he permits.

But what he permits is to be discerned. God allowing me to go my own way, okay, is something that I must discern through faith, okay, as something that God's not robbing my freedom, but at the same time, I'm not making the right decision here.

Okay? God's not going to rob my freedom, because that would be something contrary to what God wants to do, but God is teaching me that neither am I making the right decision.

The whole world is under the control of God. I am not a problem for him. Okay? My wonderings are not going to be a problem for God. God brings me back.

But that same permitting allows you to pursue your own interests. The reason why some of you became the people you did and have the jobs that you did and perhaps still have is because of what God permitted.

[21 : 55] He allowed you to pursue certain interests, to become good at certain things, and you are the person you are because of the things that God permitted to happen in your life. That's one of the ways God guides.

He allows these things to happen. You fulfill a certain role in society because God permits it. You fulfill a certain role within the church because God permits it. It's the only reason you fulfill that role because God permits it in the church.

Okay? Faith allows us to discern what God permits. Okay? Faith allows us to discern that God is guiding us through what he permits.

This is an open door. God's permitting me to walk through it. But maybe he isn't because faith also allows me to discern that I live in a world where Satan is going to provide a lot of open doors.

Okay? Faith, Satan opens lots of doors. C.S. Lewis, when he was teaching his people how to write, he says the goal of writing is fairly simple.

[22 : 58] You want to get them from the top of the track to the bottom of the track without going through any of the side doors. Your job of a writer is to close those doors off to get them from one end to the other end.

Now, we all recognize that we live in a world now, in terms of temptation, with far more open doors than we ever did before. Okay? You know, we don't want to let our children to go play in the park which is a mile away, but we don't mind them going all over the world on the internet in their bedroom.

Okay? They can be miles away there. There are different kinds of open doors and danger zones now than ever before. God permits these things, but faith allows us to discern which are the right ones to pursue and which ones are not.

Here's another way which God guides. By hindering. By not permitting. God can hinder us and we can even ask God to hinder us.

We pray, don't we? Lord, lead me not into temptation. In other words, Lord, stop me from doing it. Hinder my path. Hinder me from walking that way. Hinder me from getting into the place where I am going to be tempted to wrong you in some way.

[24 : 17] Hinder me. We even pray it. The psalmist in Psalm 19 prays to God that God would keep him from sinning. In other words, God, hinder me. Don't let it happen to me.

Well, whether we ask God or not, God will hinder us whenever he sees fit to hinder us. This means if I want to go in this direction and God doesn't want me to go in that direction, I'm not going in that direction.

Okay? There will be hindrance upon hindrance there stopping me from making any progress. Now, I should rejoice at that because I'm realizing God's control over my life and what God wants from me is better for me than I even can imagine.

But I don't rejoice at that. I complain of why God won't give me my own way. Okay? But God is guiding me through hindrance. Okay?

Abraham was told by God that he would not be hindered, that he would not be in any way, and that other people around him would be hindered from committing sin against him.

[25 : 25] Okay? Abraham wouldn't be hindered. He could go ahead and leave and go where God wanted him. No hindrance there. But when it came to people sinning against him, they would be hindered. They wouldn't be able to get away with it.

When God guides us through hindrances, we are wondering why we can't get through the fence. We are wondering why we can't get through. Why is that door always closed to me?

Why is that fence always too high for me to get around or over? And the answer could be as simple because there's a cliff on the other side. God's hindering me because he sees what's on the other side.

When we see a closed door, okay, we experience God hindering us. God's not letting me through. But we don't ever get to see what's on the other side of the door.

We think we know what's on the other side of the door. But the reason it's closed indicates two things. One, God doesn't want us to go through that way. And two, we don't really know what's on the other side.

[26 : 29] God closes doors. God can take a percentage of your income away to stop you from doing certain things. He can do a number of different things to stop you going wherever you think you are going, to keep you either where you are or to get you going in another direction.

God is a God who provides the fence at the top of the cliff long before he ever provides the ambulance at the bottom. Okay? God guides through hindrances.

And faith, faith allows us to discern that. That kind of guidance is discernible. And faith allows us to see it.

Here's another way. Limitation. God guides through measured limitations. This is why some doors are closed and other doors are opened.

In other words, my route is planned out. Some things are available to me and other things are not available to me. Some things are there for the taking and some things are never there for the taking.

[27 : 44] Okay? As I said, the devil wants to open lots of doors and faith allows us to discern which one we should go through. But how are we to discern these things? Well, faith.

Faith allows us to discern God's guidance. Here's the simplest way of how to know what God's will is for your life every single day. Okay?

Without fail. When your Godly desires, okay, are in line, are in line with the Godly opportunities.

And you have the God-given abilities. When those three things line up, then it's of God. Okay? When you have a godly desire and the godly opportunity is there and the godly ability is there to bring those three together, you know it's of God.

But there's many people who have godly desires but not the godly opportunity. Well, that's God's way of telling you. Like he had to tell David, who had a godly desire to build the temple, and God had to tell him, no, it's not you.

[28 : 53] It's going to be his son, Solomon. Okay? Those three things line up. They all always line up. Because that's how God guides. God's always done it that way.

Desire, opportunity, and ability. This is how we're able to discern where God wants us and where he doesn't want us. It just so happens to be that the devil uses the same three for his purposes.

When you have a sinful desire mixed with a sinful opportunity to fulfill that desire and the sinful ability to fulfill that desire, then guess what you've gone and done?

You've sinned. You've sinned. Okay? So, godly ability, godly opportunity, and godly desires allow us to discern that this is God's way.

But sinful desires, sinful opportunities, and sinful abilities lead us only ever into sin. It's the same trinity for both.

[29 : 53] It's the same triad for both. One leads us one way, and the other leads us the other. Okay? Think about it in a slightly different way in terms of limitation.

When God said to Job, you can do anything to my servant Job apart from kill him, that was a limitation. You think, well, it's a pretty big limitation, or a small limitation, that he could do anything.

But if you look at it from the other point of view, there's two things that you notice. One, Satan is limited. But secondly, there's a limitation as to what can happen to Job.

Okay? There's a limitation of what Job can actually go through, because there's a limitation of what can actually be done to him. That they both marry up.

So God limits, okay? And the way that we make through these open and closed doors and these limitations to understand it all, the way that we discern that guidance is through those three things lining up.

[31 : 00] My love for God, the opportunities that God gives me, and the abilities that God gives me to fulfill those desires and opportunities. Here's the last way that God guides.

And I think this one encompasses the rest. That God is in control of everything. And that means he is even in control of my decisions.

And what I mean by that is, is that God is able to overrule my decision. Now, Jesus already addressed this when he told you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him.

In other words, he's saying, your will no longer counts. Your life matters, but it matters to me. Your decisions matter, but they matter in the context of God's will.

In other words, Jesus is saying, be singular in your devotion to God. It's interesting how many men in particular fall off in old age, in Scripture.

[32 : 10] Not just in the church, but in Scripture. How many men go bad as they get older? As if their devotion slips away. Now, nobody ever wants to see that happen.

David used to fight bears. And, you know, everyone says, you know, Samson's the strongest man in the Bible. I don't think so. I mean, David wrestled lions and bears. I mean, come on.

You know, I mean, you know, sometimes we look at Samson and think, he must have been this muscle-bound monster. And yet, when Delilah looked at him, she says, where does your strength come from? Well, it couldn't have been that obvious, could it?

Right? It couldn't have been obvious if you... Well, because it was the power of God upon him. But David, in his old life, couldn't even keep himself warm. Failure.

Failure miserably. God has a way, even through all of these, to overrule my will.

[33 : 13] And here's the biggest challenge you will have on a daily basis. That your will is always going to collide with God's will. And you're going to feel it.

The point of collision between you and God will always be his will and your will. And you will collide with the will of God. You will collide with God's governance over your life.

And what you're actually colliding with is, God is overruling me here. But God overrules us in a very simple and careful way.

It's a bit like this. If I had a bowl of fruit, which could be, you know, often, you know, Galatians 5, you know, fruit, singular or plural. Well, let's imagine there are two fruit in this bowl.

A pear and an apple. Okay? And I say here, well, I want a pineapple. Okay? I've overruled your decision for what you want by there only being a pear and an apple.

[34 : 20] I can't even get to choose the pineapple or the banana that I want because I've not been offered it. And God overrules us in that kind of way. He doesn't overrule us out completely as though there's no way forward.

But rather, he overrules our decision by using all of these other things. Limitation, hindrances. Okay? Permissions. God brings all of these together at every single moment to guide us.

And faith allows us to discern how God is guiding us. That's how God does it. And what that means is this. Whether I like it or not, I could not be in any other place as a 42-year-old moving to 43 other than where I am right now.

Okay? I can be the ant and rally against God's will and God's direction. But all God has to do is turn the paper. All God has to do is just use all these powers that he has, the authority that he has of permission, overruling, limiting, to have me exactly where he wants me.

And when I collide with that, what am I colliding with? His will. His will. His will. Of what he wants. What does God allow some of the things to happen that he does?

[35 : 41] Well, like I said, God allows us to feel the full force of our good decisions and our bad ones. And our bad ones. But even your disobedience is within the control of God.

But it is much easier to discern God's guidance in obedience than it is in disobedience. So here's the conclusion.

Believers shouldn't follow each other, especially when you're not following Jesus. Don't be guided by another believer on the assumption that they are following Jesus.

This is very similar to copying the child's answers beside of you because you're assuming he must know the answer. He's getting through his sums really quickly. Look how well he's doing it.

Well, you know, I've done that a few times. You know, copying my friend's answers because he was getting through them so quickly, thinking, he's doing fine, he's going to be able to leave the classroom after this.

[36 : 41] It seems a disingenuous incentive, doesn't it? I mean, teachers who say that once you finish your exam, you can leave. Well, all the motivation to get through it quickly and leave is there, right?

You're not going to pay any. If I want to get out of this room, what do I do? If it's multiple choice, A, B, C, A, B, C, A, B, right? Where's the motivation? Well, Christians shouldn't follow Christians unless they are certain that that Christian is following Christ.

Paul even said this to Timothy. Follow me, okay, but here's the qualification. Follow me as I follow Christ. Don't just follow me, but follow me as I follow Christ.

You want to follow me, your pastor, as a Christian, you need to be certain of one thing, whether or not I'm following Christ, okay? Okay, that's the only, that's the qualification. Christ is the one we follow.

Now, it is much easier to live by faith than it is to not live by faith, but it's not easy to live by faith, okay? It's easier to live by faith and discern God's guidance, but it's not easy to do it.

[37 : 50] But this is the very thing that God wants us to do. This is the very thing that God wants us to get right. So here's the exhortation. Faith is as plain and simple as the truth.

God guides us in ways that we do not understand. God guides us in ways that we will perhaps never understand. But the one thing that God wants from you is this, that you live faithfully by faith.

I want you to think about that, that you live faithfully by faith. Don't think about living by faith. Think about being faithful to living by faith, okay?

It's one thing to live by faith, but the real issue here in all of these examples is whether or not we are faithful to living by faith. Not whether or not we live by faith, but whether or not we are faithful to it.

So recognize the issue. The issue is not whether or not God guides. God guides, okay? The issue is not whether or not God guides. He clearly guides.

[38 : 56] The issue is whether or not we are noticing it. That's the issue. So remember, faith is how you discern God guiding you.

Amen.