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What is Faith?

*Hebrews 11:1-16***Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

Faith is a part of our lives every day. Faith isn't unique to Christianity. Even people who are agnostic and atheist are full of faith in many objects. By faith, I sit at a computer and hit keys and words appear. I can travel to sites located somewhere unseen, and information appears, and people send me messages – even though I can't see them and don't know where they are, but they communicate with me, so I know they, or at least an AI bot, exist. This all happens without me having the slightest understanding of how exactly it all works.

By faith, I punch numbers into a cell phone, and again, without understanding how it works, I'm able to use it to communicate with unseen people – even though I don't know where they are. I have very limited knowledge and understanding of what's happening – that I can't see – inside both my computer and cell phone. I only use a tiny fraction of their potential, but I'm convinced they work, and they help me – and that if I spent more time learning about them, I could get so much more out of them, while feeling a little wiser and a little more capable.

By faith, we get into a car, turn a key or push a button, and even if we're totally ignorant about the process going on under the hood, we trust the car will come to life and take us where we want to go. Some cars require more faith than others. By faith, many people drove here today, trusting all the other drivers would be faithful, fulfilling their responsibility to observe the rules of the road by driving on the correct side and obeying all traffic signs. Most of you came into this room and sat down, automatically committing yourself, by faith, to a pew, assuming it would hold you. You go to your doctor and he or she writes out a prescription you can't read. You take it to a pharmacist who deciphers the scrawls and gives you a bottle of pills and says, "Take this three times a day," and by faith, you do exactly what the doctor says.

It's impossible to live without faith. Faith is a part of our lives every day. Listen to what *Hebrews 11* tells us about faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was

made from things that are not visible. **By faith Abel** offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received **approval** as righteous, God himself giving **approval** to his gifts; he died, but through his **faith** he still speaks. **By faith Enoch** was taken so that he did not experience death; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had **pleased God.**' **And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.** **By faith** Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with **faith.** **By faith** Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. **By faith** he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **By faith** he received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.' All of these died in **faith** without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them" (*Hebrews 11:1-16*).

Let's pray. O Lord, who orders all things for our eternal good, mercifully enlighten our minds, and give us a firm and abiding faith in your love and care during the challenges and opportunities of our life. Silence our murmurings, quiet our fears, and dispel our doubts, that, rising above our afflictions and our anxieties, we may trust in you, the one of everlasting strength. Amen.

Two repeated words that stand out in the verses from *Hebrews 11:1-16* are **faith** and **approval**. A relationship is being emphasized between faith and God's approval.

Hebrews 11 defines faith as “***the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.***” This isn’t a complete definition of faith; Hebrews is naming the aspects of faith the preacher hopes to encourage among believers who were wavering in their conviction and in the practice of their faith. They weren’t as regular in gathering to worship, their energy and zeal were lagging for doing good; they needed some inspiration and a reminder about what faith is all about. Sometimes, we find ourselves in a similar situation. We can attend worship less frequently, or not at all. We find ourselves growing weary of trying to do the right thing. Sometimes, we need to be reminded of what faith is about and to recommit ourselves to living as people of faith.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for – this describes **what faith has**: it already possesses in the *present* what God has promised for the *future*.

Faith is partly an **inward reality** and partly an **outward force**. Inwardly, people of faith have confidence – even when all hell seems to be breaking loose around us – that the promises of God for peace, justice, mercy, and salvation can be trusted. Faith is **an inward response to the trustworthiness of God**. That response leads to **outward action**. So, we have faith both as an inward assurance, and we embody our faith by putting it into action in the world. Faith, as inward reality, believes God’s promise that one day “*mourning and crying and pain will be no more*” (Revelation 21:4). Faith, as an outward reality we put into action in the world, prays for those who mourn, comforts those who weep, works to ease the pain of those who are wounded, and shares our faith, hope, and love with others.

The **first part of the meaning of faith is what faith has** – inward assurance leading to outward action. The second part describes **what faith perceives**. **Faith sees what is not visible**. Hebrews says, “*By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that **what is seen** was made from things **that are not visible**.*”

I like the story of a college philosophy professor who asked only one question on the final exam. He picked up a chair, put it on his desk, and wrote on the board, “Using everything we have learned this semester, prove that this chair does not exist.” The students dug deep and wrote like crazy for an hour, some of them churning out 30 pages of heady philosophy and logic in their little blue books. But one student turned in her

paper after less than a minute. Turned out she was the only one to get an “A.” Her answer – “What chair?”

Paul writes, in **2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7**, “*What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal*”; “*we walk by faith, not sight*.” Our eyes see a world of suffering, violence, hardship, greed, selfishness, stupidity, and incompetence. When we look with the eyes of faith, we’re still perplexed, but we also see the signs of God’s grace amid the toil and trouble of the world, as people of faith put their faith in action with love, kindness, and generosity. We also look at the vastness of the cosmos that God created, and we regain a little perspective.

In the comic strip “Opus”, Oliver, a boy who loves science, gives Opus and the others a little information. Opus begins saying, “I love these summer evening reality checks from Oliver.” Oliver then says, “Hold out a speck of sand at arm’s length; that’s the portion of the night sky at which they pointed the Hubble telescope for a week. It was there – deep within that dot of dark nothingness ten billion light years distant – that they found the unexpected. Galaxies! Thousands! **Thousands!** ...With **billions of stars!** And **trillions** of new worlds. And beyond those ...**MORE!** All in the space of a single grain of sand on the vast beach of the cosmos. Which nicely frames the question man has been asking for millennia.” “What question?” asks a boy. “What’s the center of it all?” Both boys and Opus have little thinking bubbles above their heads with their answers. “Me. Me. Me, baby.”

Rick Warren began his best-selling book “The Purpose Driven Life” with the four words: “It’s not about you.” Yet, it sometimes seems like many Christians want God to conform to their world view, their politics, their preferences and desires – they want God to look like them, think like them, and to conform to their agenda. That’s backwards. If we’ve learned anything, as we have journeyed through the book of Hebrews, it’s that God has an agenda, a purpose, and a plan – and wants God’s people to know it and to become faithful, active participants in that agenda, in the God movement that’s at work in the world.

Hebrews 11 is overflowing with examples of people who lived By Faith. I’m briefly going to touch on just the first three who are mentioned – Abel, Enoch and Noah – who were righteous and **approved by God because of their **faith**.**

Abel's story is in Genesis 4:1-16. He's the second son of Adam and Eve, a keeper of sheep, who made an acceptable offering from his flock to God, and was subsequently murdered by his jealous brother, Cain. This tells us that sibling rivalry is ancient, and that the farmer versus herder conflict is the oldest one in the Bible. No words of Abel are recorded while he is alive, but *Genesis 4:10* says that his blood cries out from the ground to God, who hears his plea. It appears that God considered Abel to be righteous and approved of him, **since God's approval is one of the marks of faith.** Abel died, but through his faith, he still speaks, as do the deeds of faithful people that reverberate through the years – even long after they're gone. Abel's blood, the blood of innocent suffering, cries out to God for justice – even as the blood of the innocent who suffer today still cries out to God for justice.

Abel is, in a way, a foreshadowing of Jesus. Like Jesus, Abel was approved by God, and offered a sacrifice that was acceptable to God. Abel's blood, like that of Jesus, makes intercession to God. However, there the comparison ends, as later, *Hebrews 12:24* tells us that Jesus' blood speaks a *"better word than the blood of Abel."* **Abel's blood cries out for revenge, but Jesus' blood brings an end to vengeance and grants forgiveness** (*Hebrews 9:22; 10:10*). Abel gave sacrificially, and was approved by God.

Enoch walked with God, and *Genesis 5:24* mysteriously states that *"God took him."* Hebrews believes that Enoch was so pleasing to God that he was taken directly to heaven without having to go through the door of death. Like Enoch, we can please God by approaching God as Enoch did, **"by believing that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him"** (*Hebrews 11:6*). That means we have confidence in the God who exists, the God who lives, and we have faith that serving this God really matters.

To believe that God exists is to have a profound *"conviction of things not seen."* One time, Jill and I went for a walk on Breakwater Beach, here in Brewster, on a Friday morning – just after 9:00 am, which was low tide. The Brewster flats stretched out in all their shades of tan, reaching out toward the horizon, where the blue water had receded out of reach. After we had walked east for about ten minutes, we noticed two men by a motorboat that was sitting on the barren flats. One guy was standing next to the boat with what looked like a bait bucket. Two fishing poles were visible in the boat. The other

man was sitting in the boat, looking out toward the water. I didn't know whether to laugh, or whether I should ask them if they knew how long it would be before the tide came in. I said to Jill, "I wish I had a camera – talk about **'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'**." The water wasn't seen anywhere nearby, but they had faith it was coming near, even if they would have to wait for it for a while. *Hebrews 11* warns us that **sometimes faith requires waiting**, but we wait, in faith, believing that God exists, and that God rewards those who seek the Lord. To believe that God rewards those who seek him is not to look for winning lottery tickets, but that God rewards, in God's terms, with mercy, peace, and wholeness.

Finally, **Noah (*Hebrews 11:7*)** is an example **for his response to the Word of God**. In *Genesis 6:8-9:17*, God told Noah about an event in the unseen world of the future. There was no evidence in the sensory world to back up this word, so Noah had a choice to make – to trust his limited knowledge and vision, or to have faith in God's Word. It was the world or God. Noah chose God, and did something that made no sense in worldly terms – **he built an ark to weather a storm no one else could see coming**. Through his faith in God's Word, Noah received the strength, focus, and determination to do what God wanted done.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah were pleasing to God, and received God's approval because of their faith. The rest of *Hebrews 11* goes on to describe some of the people in The Hall of Fame of Faith, who pleased God because they were righteous – **like Abel, who gave sacrificially to God; Enoch, who walked with God; and Noah, who responded, in faith, to God's Word**. *Hebrews* describes those who journeyed through life obediently, and those who were tested by suffering who responded by faith. Pastor David Pranga will be telling us some of their stories and experiences next week.

Like our spiritual ancestors, we can also please God through our faith. As we give sacrificially, walk with God in our daily lives, respond – in faith – to God's Word, journey through life obediently, and remain steadfast in suffering, we'll find our faith in unseen realities grow and deepen – even if we still don't understand everything about God, or faith, or our lives. But not understanding everything completely doesn't stop us from using a computer, cell phone, or car, or even falling in love, and it doesn't need to stop us from having faith in God. If hope is a steadfast anchor of the soul, as *Hebrews* has stated, then *Hebrews 11* declares that **faith is the chain that connects us to**

that anchor of hope. An anchor without a chain isn't helpful for a ship. That's why faith, hope, and love are spoken of together, so frequently, in the New Testament. **Faith is an inward reality that becomes an outward force that shapes our behavior and our actions. Faith sees what is not visible. We walk by faith and not by sight. Let's keep walking forward together.**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. **Hebrews 11:1 gives one of the Bible's best-known descriptions of faith.** What words or phrases stand out to you? How would you explain biblical faith to someone who has never read the Bible?
2. **The writer says that "by faith we understand" (verse 3).** How does faith shape the way we see the world? In what ways is faith different from simply having evidence or information?
3. **What do Abel, Enoch, and Noah teach us about faith?** What did each one do because they trusted God? What similarities do you see between their lives?
4. **Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God."** Why do you think faith is essential to a relationship with God? What does it mean to believe that God "exists and that he rewards those who seek him"?
5. **Verses 13-16 describe God's people as "strangers and exiles" who were looking forward to a better country.** What does that image mean to you? How can Christians live with an eternal perspective without withdrawing from the world around them?
6. **Which aspect of faith, in this passage, challenges or encourages you most, today?** Is there an area where God is asking you to trust Him more deeply? How can the group pray for you as you seek to live by faith, this week?