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BY FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-3

By

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By Faith
Hebrews 11:1-3

It is essential for every believer to understand the nature of enduring faith. As we saw last week, there is a type of faith that does not endure trials and temptations. The seed sown on the rocky ground sprang up quickly, but it also quickly withered and died when trials hit. The seed on the thorny ground may have lasted a bit longer, but eventually it was strangled by the temptations of worries, riches, and the pleasures of this life. Neither type of faith brought forth fruit to maturity. Only the seed on the good ground bore fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:11-15).

That parable serves as a useful backdrop to our text last week (10:32-29), where the author urges his readers on to enduring faith. He cites Habakkuk 2:4, "But My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him." Then he expresses his confidence in his readers (10:39), "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." His subject is "enduring faith." Some of his readers were in danger of shrinking back to destruction. With the threat of persecution looming over them, the Hebrew believers needed to be steeled to endure the coming trials by faith. He wants them to become "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12).

To that end, he devotes chapter 11 to an explanation and illustration of genuine faith that endures. He is not focusing on the aspect of justification by faith, as Paul does in Romans 3. Rather, his emphasis is more on the operation and outworking of justifying faith in the face of trials (John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], VII:5, 7). This faith lays hold of God's promises and the reality of the unseen world, obediently applying those realities to present trials. In 11:1-3, the author shows three things about such faith:

Faith is the means of realizing spiritual reality, of gaining God's approval, and of understanding the origin of all that is.

Before we look at these three aspects of faith, it may be helpful to explain something about the nature of faith with reference to relationships. What I am about to say will probably sound obvious (“Duh!”). But I often see people violate this principle in their personal relationships, causing much damage. The principle is this: *Trust is essential for close personal relationships*. If you do not trust someone, you will not allow yourself to get close to that person. You will not share personal information because you are afraid that the person will use it in a way that damages you. You will not believe the personal information that the person shares with you, because you think, “I don’t trust this guy!”

Here is a second principle for close relationships: *Truth is the basis for trust*. If someone lies to you or deceives you, you will not trust what he says or does. You will always be on guard. If you sense that the person is a hypocrite, conveying that he is something that he really is not, you will keep your distance. A lack of truth erodes trust and causes distance in relationships.

There is a third principle for close relationships: *Truth must be expressed in love*. By *love*, I mean, “seeking the highest good of the other person.” The highest good for every person is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. This motive of love must undergird all verbal expressions of truth (Eph. 4:15). To blast a person may be truthful, but it is not loving. You may say, “That’s just the way I feel,” and that’s true. But you have not said it to build the other person in Christ, and so it is not loving. On the other hand, to deceive someone under the guise of love is to deny truth. Ultimately, this will undermine the relationship, because it erodes trust.

How does all of this relate to Hebrews 11? These elements of relationships also apply to our relationship with God. Faith or trust in God is at the foundation of a relationship with Him. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (11:6). You are calling God a liar if you do not trust Him, and you cannot be close to a liar. *Truth is the basis for trust*. If you doubt the truth of God’s Word, including His promises for the future, you cannot trust Him and thus will be distant from Him.

Some of the things that God says are not easy to accept. For example, God confronts our unbelief and sin. But He always relates to us *in love*. When He sends difficult trials into our lives,

whether persecution, the loss of our health, or the loss of a loved one, we have to trust Him, believing that He is acting in love to form Christ in us. If the enemy can get us to doubt God's love in a time of trials, we will draw away from God and disobey His Word of truth. To draw near to God, we "must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (11:6).

Understanding these principles—*trust is essential for close personal relationships; truth is the basis for trust; and, truth must be expressed in love*, which means, "seeking the highest good of the other person"—shows why *faith (trust) is at the heart of a relationship with God*.

1. Faith is the means of realizing spiritual reality (11:1).

Hebrews 11:1 has always been a difficult verse for me to get a handle on. I will seek to clarify the meaning of the verse as I understand it, but I admit that my understanding may be limited. The difficulty of the verse lies in the meaning of the words translated (NASB) as "assurance" ("being certain of," NIV) and (NASB) "conviction" ("certain," NIV). The KJV and NKJV translate these words as "substance" and "evidence." The NASB and NIV understand the words as subjective, whereas the KJV and NKJV take them as objective.

The subjective understanding is, "faith means being confident of what we hope for, convinced of what we do not see." An objective understanding is, faith means "the reality of the goods hoped for," (Helmut Koster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Friedrich [Eerdmans], VIII:586), "the proof of things unseen." The Bauer, Arndt, & Gingrich *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed.] takes both words in an objective sense. It renders the first phrase (p. 847), "in faith things hoped for become realized" (or, "reality"). The second is (p. 249), "a proving of (or conviction about) unseen things."

All of the patristic and medieval scholars understood the words in the objective sense, but Melancthon advised Luther to render it, "sure confidence." Luther's interpretation has influenced most scholarship since the Reformation (Koster, *ibid.*). The Greek word, *hypostasis*, occurs twice in Paul in the sense of "confidence" (2 Cor. 9:4; 11:17), and three times in Hebrews (1:3; 3:14; and here). All scholars agree that the word is used objectively in 1:3,

which states that Christ is the exact representation of God's *nature* (*essence, or reality*).

Most scholars take the second instance (Heb. 3:14) as subjective, "hold fast the beginning of our *assurance* firm until the end." But the respected *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (*ibid.*, VII:587) argues that it does not refer there to subjective assurance, which rests within us, but to the objective reality of the faith. In this sense, the phrase is parallel to "our confession" (3:1) and "the confession of our hope" (10:23). It also argues that it has an objective sense in 11:1: "faith is the reality of the goods hoped for." "Faith is the reality of what is hoped for in exactly the sense in which Jesus is called the [exact representation] of the reality of the transcendent God in 1:3" (*ibid.*).

Since the two halves of 11:1 seem to be parallel, "conviction" (Greek, *elenchos*) would need to be taken in an objective sense, also, as "proof of things one cannot see" (*ibid.*, VII:586). Donald Hagner puts it this way (*Encountering the Book of Hebrews* [Baker], p. 142):

From the examples of faith lifted up in this chapter it seems clear that what is *not* primarily in view is what we feel or possess—assurance, confidence—but rather, how faith substantiates, or gives substance to, what is promised, how it provides evidence of what is believed about unseen and hoped-for realities. Faith, indeed, has a way of making the future present and the unseen visible.

There is, of course, overlap between the objective and subjective senses of these words. Our faith *substantiates* what we hope for, thus giving us *assurance* that they are true. Faith *proves* or *gives evidence* for the things that we cannot see, thus giving us a *conviction* that these unseen things are true. I suggest this expanded paraphrase of 11:1, "Faith makes real in our experience the promises that God has given about the future. Faith proves to us the fact that the things we presently cannot see—God, angels, demons, heaven, hell—are very much true and real." In other words, faith applies the reality of God's promises and the unseen world to life in the present, visible world.

A. W. Pink (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [Ephesians 4 Group], p. 652) uses the analogy of two men standing on the deck of a ship,

looking in the same direction. One sees nothing, but the other man sees a distant steamer. The difference is, the first man is looking with his unaided eye, whereas the second man is looking through a telescope. Faith is the telescope that brings the future promises of God into present focus. Faith enables us to see the unseen world that the natural man cannot see.

Before we leave verse 1, let's apply it by illustrating how faith worked in the lives of three Hebrew young men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (Daniel 3). The author refers to them, although not by name, in 11:34 ("quenched the power of fire"). They refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, which caused the offended king to threaten to throw them into the blazing furnace. Their response shows that by faith, they were making real in their present crisis the future promises of God regarding eternal life. By faith they saw the unseen God as more real than the enraged king standing in front of them, threatening to roast them alive. Their answer (Dan. 3:16-18) oozes with faith in the unseen God:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

You may think, "That's a great story, but what if God hadn't delivered them? What if they had been burned to death?" The answer is, they would have died in faith and God would reward them abundantly throughout eternity in heaven. Many martyrs have died at the stake because of their faith. The Roman Catholic Church promised Jan Hus, the brave Czech martyr, safe passage to a hearing. After he arrived, they said, "We promised you safe passage here, but not a safe return." They threw him in prison and condemned him to death because he condemned many of their corrupt practices, which were contrary to Scripture. As they burned him at the stake, he died singing! How could he do that? His faith made real in the present the future promises of God. His faith proved the reality of the unseen God as greater than the reality of the flames that burned him to death.

George Muller was another man who made God's promises real by faith, and proved in a visible way the reality of the invisible God. He literally gave away all of his money and possessions and, by faith, founded an orphanage in Bristol, England. Eventually that orphanage grew to 2,000 children who needed food, clothing, and shelter every day. Muller had no savings accounts and he refused to make the needs of the ministry known, even to potential donors. He wanted to prove to the world that there is reality in dealing with the living God. He saw thousands of specific answers to prayer, which he carefully recorded and later published. Concerning faith, he wrote (*George Muller of Bristol*, A. T. Pierson [Revell], p. 437, italics his):

It is the very time for *faith* to work, when *sight* ceases. The greater the difficulties, the easier for *faith*. As long as there remain certain natural prospects, faith does not get on even as easily (if I may say so), as when all natural prospects fail.

So in developing the theme of enduring faith, our author's first point is that faith is the means of realizing spiritual reality.

2. Faith is the means of gaining God's approval (11:2).

"For by it the men of old gained approval." The clear implication is that the approval comes *from God*, as the rest of the chapter shows (11:4, 5, 6, 39). The world often ridicules or despises the person who lives by faith.

The author mentions Moses (11:24-26), who "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God." He considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; ..." Imagine what those in the Egyptian court must have said about Moses: "He walked away from the wealth and prestige of being the son of Pharaoh's daughter to lead a ragtag bunch of common slaves out into the Judean wilderness! Why? Because he believes that God has called him to do it! Ha! Ha! What a loony tune!"

Why did Moses do what he did? Because "he was looking to the reward" (11:26). "By faith ...he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (11:27). By faith Moses gained God's approval, even though he received the world's scorn. And it is God's approval that counts, since He is the judge of the living and the dead!

We need to recognize that faith is not a meritorious work that we do to gain rewards from God. That would conflict with the entire teaching of the New Testament, that faith is simply the channel through which God's blessings flow. Two seemingly paradoxical things are true of faith: On the one hand, it is *our responsibility* to believe the gospel, because God commands us to believe (Mark 1:15). On the other hand, sinners are *unable to believe* because of spiritual blindness (2 Cor. 4:4). Saving faith comes as God's gift, not as a human effort (Eph. 2:8-9). Jesus is both the author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2). Good works flow from saving faith as their source and give proof of genuine faith (Eph. 2:10; James 2:14-26). Both faith and works come from God.

Let me apply verse 2 in two ways. First, have you gained God's approval by putting your trust in Christ alone as your only hope of heaven? As we saw in chapter 10, Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the *only* basis for forgiveness of sins. Don't hope in your good works, because all the good works in the world can never erase the debt of sin that you owe. Don't hope in your faith, because faith in your faith can't save you. Put your faith in Jesus Christ! He will save all that come to Him in faith.

Second, if you have trusted in Christ as Savior, live each day to seek His approval. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (11:6). While we should never be needlessly offensive toward people, our focus should not be on pleasing people, but on pleasing God, who examines our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4). Although I am not an example of great faith, I can share a personal example. Just after I became pastor here, I had to take a stand on a matter that resulted in a lot of conflict. I did what I did because I believed it to be biblical and thus pleasing to God, but it resulted in a number of people trying to get me fired. At one point before we knew how things would turn out, I said to Marla, "I am at peace that even if I get fired, God will take care of us, because I did the right thing." Live to please God and you will know His peace, even if people angrily oppose you.

So faith is the means of realizing spiritual reality and of gaining God's approval. Finally,

3. Faith is the means of understanding the origin of all that is (11:3).

“By faith we understand that the ages [lit.] were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” This is the first of 19 uses of “by faith” in this chapter. All of the others relate to a parade of characters from the Old Testament who trusted in God. But this first one goes back to Genesis 1, to the biblical account of creation. “The word of God” here does not refer to His written word, but to His spoken word. It refers to the repeated phrase, “then God said” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). As Psalm 33:6, 9 affirms, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.”

“Ages” (“worlds”) is a Hebrew way of referring to the creation from the standpoint of its successive duration. While the term is roughly equivalent to “world,” it allows for what modern science has established, that time is related to matter. The author says that faith gives us understanding of how the material universe (and time) came into being, namely, by God’s spoken word. Matter is not eternal. God, who is Spirit, is eternal. The eternal God brought physical matter and time into being by His powerful word alone!

You can only understand that by faith, because no one was there to observe it. The prevailing current worldview, that matter always existed and that the current universe, including man, happened by sheer chance over billions of years, is based on blind faith, because there is no evidence to support it. The biblical view, that the eternal God spoke it into existence, is based on faith, but *not* on *blind* faith. There is abundant evidence that an incredibly intelligent Designer created everything, especially human life. You would think that a discovery such as human DNA, which shows amazing design, would cause all scientists to fall down in worship before God. But as Paul explains (Rom. 1:18-22), sinful men suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They become futile in their speculations, their foolish hearts are darkened, and professing to be wise, they become fools.

The fact that the author puts verse 3 at the start of his list of “by faith” examples, shows that faith in God as Creator is foundational to knowing God. The first verse of the Bible hits us squarely with a vital fact: “In the beginning God created the heavens and

the earth." You cannot begin to understand yourself, other people, world history, or God if you reject the early chapters of Genesis. The first verse of Genesis presents you with a crucial choice: If God created everything that is, then He is the sovereign of the universe. If you do not come to Him in faith as your Savior, you will stand before Him in terror as your Judge! But when you believe in His Word about salvation, you gain understanding about the origins of the ages that makes everything in history fall into place.

Conclusion

The author does not want us to have a temporary, flimsy faith that shrinks back to destruction. He wants us to have a faith that endures trials to the preserving of the soul (10:39). Such faith takes the future promises of God and makes them real in the present. It proves the reality of the unseen world. It gains God's approval. It understands the origins of all that is.

Such faith, as we will see in the numerous examples of Hebrews 11, is down to earth and practical. It has sustained the people of God through thousands of years in every sort of difficulty. It will sustain you in the trials that you face right now! As Jonathan Edwards said as his final words, "Trust in God and you need not fear" (*Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, Iain Murray [Banner of Truth], p. 441).

Discussion Questions

1. How does a person who struggles with doubts get faith and grow strong in faith?
2. Since God's promises are given in specific contexts, how can we know which of them apply to us now?
3. Why is it important to affirm that faith is not a work that gains God's merit? How do rewards fit in with faith?
4. Why is the doctrine of creation by God's word crucial for knowing Him and for the Christian life?

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