

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above all Things

What is Faith?

Hebrews 11:1-3

Text:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.² For by it the people of old received their commendation.³ 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.

Introduction:

The question before us today is what is faith?

Last week I gave you an overview of the 11th chapter and began by stating the kinds of ways we use the word “faith” that are not biblical uses of the word, and therefore, are not consistent with the way the author uses the word in Hebrews. Let me quickly give you those uses again:

1. ***Faith as synonymous with world’s religions:*** This might best be characterized by the common question at work, “What faith are you?” The answer could come back with anything from Christian faith to Islamic faith. “Faith” means nothing more than religion.
2. ***Faith as a life of deep reflective devotion:*** “She is a person of deep faith.” But here again, such faith could be used of any god one follows, whether of Buddha, Krishna or Christ. Here, “faith” means spirituality. “She is a deeply spiritual person.”
3. ***Faith as faith in God’s goodness to me:*** That is faith can only produce good for me. This is the name-it-and-claim-it faith. Such faith is the far removed from the faith that is envisioned in ch 11 – faith that came to people as they were sawn in two, stoned and killed with the sword. The health, wealth and prosperity crowd could not envision that being sawn in two can be a life of faith, only a life of ease, comfort and bounty.
4. ***Faith as leap-of-faith:*** “You’ve just got to have faith.” This misconception arises even with in the true church. Such thinking assumes that faith is always blind. Faith is not blind. While it is true that Hebrews 11 speaks of faith as being the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things *not seen*, it is not to be thought of as speaking of a blind leap into the unknown. For even though God may call you to leave your Ur of the Chaldeas to go to some unknown distant land (cf. v.8), there is still plenty of assurance and plenty of evidence based on what you do know, namely that God has called you to the move and that he is with you each step of the way. So this notion that you have to act contrary to what you do know and just trust that things are going to turn out the way you want them is unfamiliar to the Bible’s use of faith. Faith is always acting in accord with what you do know even though you may not know all that you want to know right now!
5. ***Faith as creed:*** Now this is a biblical use of the word “faith” (cf. Gal. 1.23; 1 Tim. 4.1, 6; Jude 3), but not the way it will be used in ch.11. Usually faith is the activity that springs from a certain set of beliefs. You are not necessarily a person who lives by faith simply because you give mental assent to the right doctrine. If that doctrine is not causing you to act in accord with truth, your faith is dead (cf. James 2.14-26).

The question then for us is what is faith? How does the author of Hebrews define the word? The answer is given for us in the first verses of Hebrews 11.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.² For by it the people of old received their commendation.³ 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.

Let's focus our attention on the first verse.

V. 1 does not give us a technical definition of faith as much as it provides for us a description of the nature and importance of true faith.

In order to answer the question, "What is faith?" two options present themselves. (Now stay with me here because this is very philosophical and grammatical; but it is essential, I believe, if we are going to truly understand the place of v.1.)

His answer to the question, "what is faith?" is: "Faith is *upostasis* (assurance); faith is *elegkos* (conviction). His answer is two-fold. But there are two options presented to us in the way we are to understand and translate these words. We can either take them subjectively or we can understand them objectively. If we take them subjectively then we are referring to the realities that are within us. They are subjective realities. We will call them feelings. Faith is the feeling of assurance that I have with regard to things hoped for; faith is the feeling of conviction I have with reference to things not seen. These are feelings that exist inside of me.

The other option is to take the words objectively. Taken objectively, we would be referring to those realities that exist outside of ourselves that are clearly visible to all. So whereas subjective is private and internal, objective is public and external. We are referring not to a feeling within but to a response without. Faith, then, is the confident response that brings things hoped for into realization; faith is the response that makes evident that which cannot be seen.

So, instead of translating the words subjectively by the words "assurance" and "conviction," let's understand them objectively and translate them with the words "essence" and "evidence."

Now, I think we know we are on the right path when we see how the word *upostasis* is used in Hebrews 1:3:

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his *nature*...

The word nature is our same word. Jesus is the exact imprint (copy) of the reality. Do you see? The same word is translated by Paul elsewhere as "essence." So when we say that "faith is the essence of the things hoped for" we mean that faith is that which makes the thing hoped for a reality. That is, faith is what brings it into being.

There is a second piece of evidence that demonstrates we are onto the right interpretation and it has to do with the context of chapter 11. Throughout this chapter, the emphasis is not upon the subjective confidence of the persons mentioned, but on the ways in which they acted out, or gave expression to their faith.

The author's argument is that true faith results in bold conduct that points unmistakably to the reality not yet seen. The second word that the author uses, which is translated by the ESV as "conviction," literally means "a means of proof." If we were in a court room and the judge asked you for a means of proof what would you call the thing you hand over? Evidence! Evidence is the means of proving. Once the jury sees the evidence, the means of proof, they become convinced and can thereby convict the criminal with conviction. Conviction is the subjective feeling that they have as a result of the objective evidence. Well, the author is here saying that faith is not the feeling that arises but the evidence that comes forth.

This is completely parallel with James when he says, “Show me your faith by your works.” He doesn’t want the subjective feeling. He wants to see the external, verifiable, clearly measurable and definable works.

Here is what it means to be a person of faith, then.

- If what you believe does not affect the way you live, your faith is **dead**.
- If what you believe does not change your words, thoughts and deeds, your faith is **impotent**.
- If what you believe does not impact your character, your faith is **futile**.

So the **first thing** we notice about the nature of true faith is that it is a **response**. Faith is a response.

But what is it a response to?

To say that faith is a response presupposes that something must precede it. That is exactly the case. That which precedes faith is here called, “things hoped for” and “things not seen.” In other words, things that are **future** and things that are **invisible** precede faith. But that answer is too vague. There must be more and there is.

The word translated “things” is not some impersonal pronoun but a proper noun that means “matters, deeds or affairs.” There are matters and deeds that we hold onto with confidence. That is, they are hoped for and faith responds to these matters and deeds hoped for with boldness. We are clearly talking about the promises of God.

Let’s illustrate using Abraham. God made a promise to Abraham that he would become a great nation. That promise was made when as of yet Abraham had not descendants, no sons. It’s pretty difficult to become a great nation if you have no sons. But God kept the promise and gave him a son named Isaac. Then God commanded Abraham to sacrifice that son upon an altar on Mt. Moriah. There had been a promise made. It was a held to with confidence. That is, it was a matter hoped in. Now, a command was issued that called for Abraham to respond in faith. Can you hear the conversation? “Lord, I understand that you want me to sacrifice my only son. As to this matter regarding me becoming a great nation, I am still clinging to that promise, you know? And I am responding in faith – even now you can see I am gathering wood. This doesn’t make sense to me but I trust your word.”

Over his shoulder he cried out to Isaac, “Son! Come with me!” As they walked up the mountain together, Abraham’s mind was racing until...he got it. “God’s going to raise him from the dead.” “Yeah, Lord! You’re going to raise him from the dead.”

Hebrews 11:17-19 (ESV)

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham’s faith was an active response to God’s promises and commands that made the promise a reality for Abraham. It made the nation as of yet invisible to be clearly visible.

The **second thing** to see about the nature of true faith is that faith is **future oriented**. Faith is preceded by the promises and commands of God. Faith is always in response to God’s promises and commands.

Abraham’s eyes of faith were on the future promise of a nation and not on the present pain of losing a son. Abraham’s eyes of faith were on the reliability of God and His word and not on the rationale for killing a son. Do you see how that kind of faith produces perseverance?

Let me give you one more example from the life of Abraham of the future orientation of faith. Notice Hebrews 11:9-10

Hebrews 11:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

I am arguing that faith is the response that makes the hidden transparent and the future present. So the next question is how does faith bring the things hoped for (future promises) into reality? How does faith make visible the invisible?

The answer is not what you might think! How can I make the promises of God a reality in my life? How can I bring the future into the present? The answer is by responding in active obedience to the current revelation. Or, put it differently: The answer is by responding in active obedience to today's commands!

Relatively few of the Bible's promises come to us unconditionally. Did you ever notice how many of God's promises come to us with a condition attached? That means that if you want the promise to become a reality start today by obeying the command. If you want the future to enter the present obey that which God is calling you toward today.

The **third thing** to notice about the nature of true faith is that faith is **active in obedience**.

Far too many evangelicals want to turn faith into something passive. Ask today's evangelicals if they have faith and they will "Yes." Ask them how they know and they will respond with a recitation of a creed: "I believe in God. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus Christ lived and died 2000 years ago for the sins of man. I believe he was dead and buried and that he rose again the third day and is returning to judge the earth."

The author of Hebrews screams out, "NO!! That's the wrong answer!"

How do you know you have faith? I'm not asking what you believe. I'm asking you to give me the external manifestation that manifests the future and the invisible in your life.

- I want to hear how dads in response to the command of God in Ephesians 6 respond in active obedience and call the family together today and start leading them spiritually.
- I want to hear how some of you have heard the Word of God when it says "If you confess me before men, I will confess you before the Father" and in response you have stepped out in faith to be baptized as a believer.
- I want to hear how you respond in active obedience to the command of God in Matthew about laying up treasures in heaven and not on earth and how you start giving stuff away today.
- I want to hear how you in bold faith respond to God's command about loving your enemy caused you to give the Gospel to your neighbor.

Active obedience to the commands of God while laying hold on his promises substantiates faith. Did you hear that word "substantiate"? Faith substantiates the things hope for. Faith gives substance to things hoped for. Faith is the substance of things hoped for.

Faith is active in obedience to today's commands even when the future is unseen.

Hebrews 11:8 (ESV)

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Hebrews 11:13 (ESV)

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Hebrews 11:27 (ESV)

²⁷ By faith he [Moses] left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

What keeps a missionary persevering in the midst of persecution? He knows that his eyes of faith are not on the visible but that the invisible and the invisible is now clearly seen. Isn't this what Paul meant when he said "we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7)?

I wonder if the three Hebrew children in the fire are not meant to be an OT picture of this NT reality. They were so bold in their active obedience, "We will obey God and not man for our God will deliver us" – both a command and a promise – and the invisible became visible. "Did we not throw three men in the fire?" Nebuchadnezzar asked. "Why do I see four?"

You and I can endure great hardship in life when we know our obedience is in keeping with the command of God while laying hold on his promises. The strength that comes to us in those moments of obedience makes the promises real, tangible, and substantial.

That leads us to the **fourth** and final observation as to the nature of true faith. Faith **embraces the ultimate**.

This is the point of v.2 – "For by it [faith] the ancients received their commendation."

They received their commendation from whom?

And what was the commendation?

He answers these questions throughout the next section.

Look at v.4 – "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him..."

Both questions are answered here:

- Who commended Abel for his response of active obedience to the command of God? The answer is that God commended him.
- What was the commendation? The answer is that God now accounted him as righteous.

Notice v.5 – "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."

Here the commendation is the pleasure of God. Do you remember 10:38? "But my righteous ones shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." The point of Enoch's commendation is that through his life of faith, God's soul took pleasure in him.

But the answer gets more specific in the next instance. Look at v.7:

Hebrews 11:7 (ESV)

⁷ 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 condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The commendation that these three men received from God was the declaration that you are my righteous ones. My soul is pleased with you. In short, the commendation of God is the justification that comes by faith.

We will delve into this more at a later time.

But suffice it to say here that the ultimate end of all our endeavors is whether or not God sees our acts as the fruits of a faith that flows from his righteous ones.

There are many fears that keep you from trusting Christ: the fear of the unknown, the fear of man, the fear of failure, and the fear of death are some of the fears mentioned in this chapter. We'll see them as we go through.

Conclusion:

How is your faith? How do you know you have faith? Don't quote for me your creed – rehearse for me the way God has strengthened you for a life of obedience as you respond in active obedience to the commands of God while laying hold on His promises.

True faith is your response of active obedience to the commands of God while laying hold on His promises.

How is your faith? This question will be answered by your life!

With each step of active obedience the future becomes present and the promises become substantiated – the invisible becomes tangible.

Walk by faith and not by sight so that the invisible may become visible!