

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above all Things

Draw Near By Faith

Hebrews 11:1-7

Text:

Hebrews 11:1-8 (ESV)

¹ 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. ⁴ 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. 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. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 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.

Introduction:

In order for us to follow the train of thought here in chapter 11, a series of questions need to be asked of the text.

Question #1

Last week we addressed the question: “What is faith?”

We found that the author of Hebrews was not so much concerned with defining faith as much as he was with showing the nature and importance of true faith. The closing statement that we gave – the definition that we arrived at was that ***true faith is a response of active obedience to the commands of Christ while laying hold of his promises.***

Real faith is never blind because it is always a response to God. That is to say that God is always prior to true faith. First comes God’s revelation about himself, God’s Word, God’s promises, God’s commands, then our response to that revelation, word, promise, or command is either a response of faith or not. Our response is either a response of obedience or a response of disobedience. E either trust or we deny.

It should come as no surprise to those students of the Bible, then, that unbelief and disobedience are inextricably linked. Do you recall chapter 3?

Hebrews 3:16-19 (ESV)

¹⁶ For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

If disobedience is linked so tightly with unbelief, then obedience is linked with faith and faith is manifested by obedience. There is an obedience that flows from faith. When I trust that God is for me, I will do what he says.

As we saw last week, faith is that response of active obedience that substantiates God's promises – the things hoped for and makes God – the invisible God – clearly seen. So we might paraphrase v.1 like this: “Now faith is the response that gives substance to things hoped for and provides proof to things not seen.”

You notice that there are “things hoped for,” which we will call **God's promises** and there are “things not seen,” which we will call **God's person**. And remember those two aspects. We will return to them at the end.

Question #2

Now – the question that we have before us today is: “***How does faith please God?***” What is it about faith that pleases God? Where do we get this question?

In v. 2, the author says that it was by faith that “the people of old received their commendation.” The word “commendation” in this context means “to be well spoken of.” The writer of Hebrews says that the people of old, because of their faith, were well spoken of. But we must ask, “Who spoke well of them?”

The answer that comes back to us in the following paragraph is that they were well spoken of by God. In other words, God found their actions approvable or commendable. They pleased God. Notice v.4:

Hebrews 11:4 (ESV)

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him [God speaking well of him] by accepting his gifts.

Notice what he says about Enoch in v.5:

Hebrews 11:5 (ESV)

⁵By faith Enoch was taken up [he was translated from one realm to another] 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.

Abel and Enoch pleased God.

So what is the conclusion that the author comes to? If you know that someone has pleased God, what is the one absolute, rock-bottom conclusion you can draw about them? You can conclude that they have faith.

The problem is, however, that if you and I go back to the OT accounts of the lives of these two men, we will not find one single reference to the fact that they had faith. The word never appears. Yet, the author is certain that they pleased God by faith. How is he so certain?

The answer is that he holds this truth as a presupposition: “Without faith it is impossible to please God!” Those are the very next words that follow in v.6.

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please him...

In other words, the author reasons like this: We know that Abel pleased God, and we know that Enoch pleased God. Therefore, we know that they had faith because no one can please God without faith.

And now I think you can see how we arrive at today's question: How does faith please God? Or, what is it about the nature of faith that pleases God?

He gives the answer at the end of v.6. First he makes the claim, "And without faith it is impossible to please him..." and then he gives the reason, "...for [=because] whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

- No one draws near to God who doubts and does not believe that God exists.
- No one seeks God who doubts and does not believe that God will reward.

That's the bottom line!

So, faith begins with two bottom line assumptions: **God is real and God rewards.**

Question #3

But *what are the rewards?* It's not hard to see what the author is getting at.

If you are on a gold expedition, what exactly is it that you seek? The answer is gold. As you seek gold what is the reward you want when you find gold? The answer is gold.

If you are on a diving mission to recover pearls of great price, what is it exactly that you are seeking? The answer is pearls. If you are seeking pearls, what is the reward you long for at the end of your dive? The answer is pearls.

If you would draw near to God, what is it that you seek? The answer is God. If you are seeking God, what is the reward you long for at the end of your journey? The answer is God!

So, Yes! Faith begins with the assumption that God is real. And it is driven along by the fact that God is rewarding.

God is real and God is rewarding! God exists and God is excellent! God is true and God is treasure!

Faith is always preceded by God. Or, to put it differently, God is always prior to faith. You do not come to God; you will not draw near to God; you will not seek after God if you do not believe he exists and is excellent. No one pursues dead-end streets.

But faith sees...

Faith sees something about God...

Faith sees there is something about God's person...

Faith sees there is something about God's person that holds forth great promise!

And faith wants GOD...and all that He promises to be for us because of Jesus Christ.

Question #4

What is it that faith sees about God?

Faith sees that God exists as fullness and flood. Here is what I mean.

God declared in the OT that his name was "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14) and what he meant was that his existence is an absolute existence. He never came into being, he does not change and he does not grow. He means that his existence is an absolutely independent existence. He relies on no one and needs nothing. He is completely and totally full.

Because God is so complete and so full it means that no one serves him with hands as though he needed anything but that all things look to him for life and breath. That is how Paul put it in Acts 17:25. But he did not stop with the essentials of life and breath; he added another word – “everything!” We need God for everything. And from his fullness flows all things. He is full and he is flood.

God is the all-sufficient one and we are the all-dependent ones. God gives and our needs are met.

Faith sees that.

Faith sees that God is desirable and so it draws near.

I am arguing that the reward is God himself. There is a very powerful proof of this in the next verse. But let me first show you how not to interpret the reward.

You might be tempted to misread the reward of v.6 as anything else but God. The health-wealth and prosperity preachers do. Don't believe for one minute that this verse teaches that if you pursue God you will get money. And don't believe for one minute that this verse teaches that if you pursue God you will get health. Don't think for one minute that you can pursue God as a means to anything else. You don't go to God in order to get what you really want – like money! How absurd!

Let's skip v.7 and Noah for a minute and we'll go to Abraham in v.8.

Hebrews 11:8 (ESV)

⁸By 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.

You might be tempted to think that Abraham pursued God by faith because God said he was going to give him the biggest piece of real estate anyone has ever owned. It's about the material wealth – is it not?

So Abraham took off pursuing God because he wanted that piece of land with all the wealth it would mean. He envisioned the biggest and baddest city so he went on. Read on in v.9:

Hebrews 11:9-10 (ESV)

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

Oh how he got tired of tents and sandals. He just wanted a city that was stable and secure one with foundations and walls. Earthly Jerusalem – that was the ultimate reward in Abraham's mind – what a gloriously rich and powerful city that would be. Right?

WRONG! That is wrong on two counts:

1. Abraham died and never saw the promise fulfilled. Notice the first phrase of v.13:

Hebrews 11:13 (ESV)

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised...

2. Even when Abraham's physical feet were treading the soil of the physical land of Palestine, he knew that was not ultimate. He knew there was something better – something heavenly. V.13f.

Hebrews 11:13-16 (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. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. [Do you see that word “seeking”?] ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

When I read that last sentence, “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,” I hear the word “commendation.” God is pleased to be called their God because they demonstrate by their faith that the God they are pursuing is more to be desired than all the good things he might give us along the earthly journey.

Don’t think for one minute that God can be pursued as a means to some other end! That is the height of blasphemy and idolatry!

Well, let’s wrap it up like this, then. If God is the reward...if there is something about his person that is promising then what is the one thing that might keep you from him? The answer is your sin and his wrath.

I think that is the purpose of bringing in Noah after v.6. Noah was the first precursor to God’s wrath and universal judgment on sin. Noah was the first precursor of a righteous man being delivered / saved by the grace of God. And Noah is mentioned here as having been saved because of his faith.

Noah’s faith was an active response to God’s command to build an ark while he embraced the promise of salvation and deliverance from God’s judgment. And Noah’s reward was to be given status of one who is righteous by faith. This phrase sounds very similar to Paul’s teaching on justification by faith.

But here again, justification, the forgiveness of sins, redemption, and reconciliation are not ends in themselves but means to an end. You will never be able to draw near to God unless your sins are dealt with.

Noah demonstrates that God does deal with sin and he does deliver those who have faith in his promising person.

There is a judgment day coming when God will condemn the world to a Godless eternity. Only those who find God rewarding will be saved from his wrath.

Conclusion:

Christian, do not come to God as a means to anything other than him. Make God your desired goal in everything you pursue.

Come empty before the All-sufficient Supplier of your every need and desire. He will fill your cup.

Come weary and weak to the All-powerful God who will become your strength and lift you up.

You are the dependent and he is the self-sufficient supplier.

Make him your all-in-all!

And if you are here and have never seen God as the supreme reward to be sought after, I pray that God will open the eyes of your heart to let you see that he is both true and treasure and I pray that he will grant you the faith to pursue him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.