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# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## The Content of Faith Part 2 (A Primer on Faith) Hebrews 11:1-3

*1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.*

We began last week by looking at the broad subject of faith seeing from both the Scripture itself and specifically from Hebrews 11 that faith is most significant to us, primary and of most importance as well as the our need to know the very substance, the make up of faith. In its most simplistic form, faith means to have an implicit trust in someone or something. By the way the word is used in the New Testament, we can expand upon this definition and say that faith, is a *firm and fully confident trust in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ*. Faith is a “*certitude – a dynamic certainty about what God has promised through His Word.*”<sup>1</sup> Calvin said that faith is “*a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.*” Biblical faith is fluid, ever growing, ever expanding upon its appreciation and action upon the promises of God. Beyond the fact that our author uses this word “faith” in Hebrews 11 more than it is used in any other chapter of the New Testament, and beyond the fact that faith is an attribute that must affect the mind, the heart and the will of a person, let us proceed to be lead where our text now goes, into this familiar, yet profoundly deep description of faith in verses 1-3.

I would have you note that there is a simple chapter division that you ought to keep in mind. Hebrews 11:1-3 provide us with a *description* of faith while verses 4-40 provide us with the *demonstrations* of such a faith in the lives of God’s people. We have this *exposition* of faith in verses 1-3 followed by the *examples* of faith in the rest of the chapter; the *attributes* of faith and then the *action* of it. All this offers us a key truth, a truth that we can consider for ourselves this morning, a truth that is at the heart of the purpose of the author of Hebrews. The truth is this – believers in the superiority of Christ (Hebrews 1-10) are to be familiar enough with what true Biblical faith *is* so that they can know what true Biblical faith *does* in the life of a believer.

And so we begin with looking at what true Biblical faith is – the description of faith in Hebrews 11:1-3 noting four key fundamentals:

- I. Faith is assurance (1a)
- II. Faith is action (1b)
- III. Faith is acceptance (2)
- IV. Faith is awareness (3)

Let me say that Hebrew 11:1-3 was not intended to be a full definition of faith, but rather a general description of faith so that we might the then come to see how such a faith works in the lives of God’s people, being able to take these characteristics of verses 1-3 and see them

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from R.Kent Hughes, “Hebrews, An Anchor for the Soul, Vol. 2” – p. 60.

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in some form or another in the people of faith. Let us consider these one by one, asking the Lord to reveal to us these fundamentals at work in our faith.

## I. Faith is assurance (1a)

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for...*

The first description of faith is that that is the assurance of things hoped for. Those familiar with the KJV know that this verse reads that faith is the substance of things hoped for. This word “**assurance**” is a rich word meaning “support, foundation, confidence, full essence or nature.” It was a word that was used outside of the Bible to speak of a document that confirmed ownership – a title deed. We might rightly say that true faith is the title deed of things hoped for. The author of Hebrews has used twice before this word “assurance” and so I would have us appeal to him for grasping what this means and therefore how it applies to us. The last time we say this word “**assurance**” was back in Hebrews 3:14 (turn there) where we read –

***For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...***

What is meant by this holding fast being “***the beginning of our assurance...***”? At the beginning of Hebrews 3, in verse 1 we find that we are to consider Jesus as the Apostle and High priest of our confession, that is the one sent of God to speak to us of God and the one appointed by God to deliver us from our sins. We are to “hold fast” to the title deed of Jesus being our Apostle and High priest.

Additionally, this word is was first used by the author in a seemingly unique way in Hebrews 1:3 (turn there) where we read this –

***And He [Jesus] is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature [assurance – sure essence or nature], and upholds all things by the word of His power.***

To continue with the “title deed” thought – all the things that make God – God, belong to, are confidently wrapped up in the very person of Jesus. Jesus is the assurance that God exists, that God has spoken to humanity and that God has cared for humanity. Let us apply these thoughts to Hebrews 11:1. Just as Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest (3:1) confidently belongs to believers; and just as the things of God confidently belong to Jesus (1:3), the things hoped for by believers confidently belongs to faith. What are these “things hoped for...”? This is a reference to the general yet great promises of God. We hope for the return of Christ, which is called the “Blessed Hope” in Titus 2:13. We hope for the resurrection of the believing dead to the bliss of eternal life, which is called the “living hope” in 1 Peter 1:3. We hope for Christlikeness, trusting in the words of 1 John 3:2-3 –

***2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.***

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Additionally, we hope for full pardon and redemption of sin and full assurance of eternal life by the sole provision of Jesus Christ as 1 Corinthians 15:19 says that **“if we have hoped in Christ [for such things] in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”** These are just a few of the hopes that the believer has as certain and can only have them now, by faith. Let us be cultivating a faith that truly grows in this kind of inner confidence that the promises of God belong to the person who exercises faith, this one who believes that the future as promised by God is just as real and just as certain as the present. As John Owen noted about this – *“What we hope for here [in the present and now], therefore, is all the things that are divinely promised to those who believe, all things of present grace and future glory.”*<sup>2</sup> These things **hoped for** are not merely wishes or vain aspiration, but those of faith are sure of these things coming to pass because this what God-given, Christ-manufactured faith is – the certainty, the assurance, the sure essence of these things.

## II. Faith is action (1b)

...the conviction of things not seen.

Faith is not only this confident assurance, but is also said to be **“the conviction of things not seen.”** The assurance first spoken of refers to an internal confidence. The idea behind conviction here is that of external action. This word “conviction” has sometimes been translated “evidence” – the outward expression of the inward assurance. It is the action, proof, or behavior that comes as a result of what one believes in his heart. For example, if I say, in accordance with Galatians 2:20, that I have been crucified with Christ, that I believe in my heart that my old self has been nailed to the cross, this is my assurance, this is my sure confidence, that my sinful self has been put to death, then the corresponding conviction, or evidence of that is what? That *“it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by...faith...in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”* If I have the assurance that my sinful self has been put to death with Christ, then the proof or evidence of that will be that my life is now lived in, through and for Christ.

Faith is the evidence, the reality, the proof that things which I otherwise I have not seen and yet having an effect upon my life. For example, I have never seen an angel (at least that I was aware of). I have never seen heaven or hell. But the reality of these things affect my behavior by faith/ By faith I believe that angels are ministering spirits, because I cannot see them. By faith I believe that heaven and hell exist, for I have not seen them. By faith, I believe in the person of Jesus, though I have never seen Him, and yet by faith the person of Jesus affects my behavior. I pray that there is evidence, conviction and proof that Jesus changes my life. In the words of 1 Peter 1:8 –

***and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,***

When I rejoice in Christ, I do so by faith and my rejoicing is my evidence that while I do not see Jesus now, I will one day see Him. Does your faith result in such action. Let us

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<sup>2</sup> Owen, John, “Hebrews” – pp. 217-218

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cultivate a faith that demonstrates all the more the reality of those things that we do not yet see. Let us be those who know the truth of James 2:17, **“Even so faith, if it has no works [no action] is dead, being by itself.”** There is an old saying that comes out of the Reformation that says, “Faith alone saves, but not the faith that is alone.” Faith is action, faith works, faith responds to an invisible God in the hopes of yet to be seen rewards. When I live by faith, such faith is the proof, the evidence that all that I have not seen and hope for will come to pass.

### III. Faith is acceptance (2)

*For by it the men of old gained approval.*

So then, faith is assurance in the promises of God and faith is action, manifesting godly behavior toward God and now thirdly, faith is acceptance for we read, **“for by it [faith] the men of old gained approval.”** Here we have offered one of the first results for benefits of faith. I know we might not like to admit it, but sometimes we do get a “what’s in it for me” kind of attitude. Even when we pursue something as noble as going to church, or serving the Lord, we can do it more for what we can get out of it rather than what we can put into it. Now, if one wanted to put this subject of faith so crudely, he might say, “of what benefit is faith to me?” Why should I live by faith, in things only hoped for or things not yet seen? Our author appeals to example of Scripture itself. He calls his predominately Jewish congregation to think back over the great persons of the Bible, calling them, **“the men of old”** or literally, the elders, or “the ones of old,” those whom who know lived by faith and some of whom will be used as examples in the verses to come.

And what is said about those who lived by faith in the past? What was the benefit for lives of sacrifice, dependence and trust in the Lord? By faith, these **“gained approval.”** This is an awkward translation of a word that is used five times in Hebrews 11. The verb literally means “to witness or to testify.” It is in the passive voice in four of the five uses, meaning that someone has witnessed or testified of something for someone else. In other words, by faith, or because of faith, the OT saints obtained a good testimony, or a good report. They were accepted and spoken well of by someone, having gained approval from someone. So, who are these accepted ones and who is the one who did the accepting?

The answer to the first question is easy enough. Those who **“gained approval”** or “obtained this good witness” were the saints of old in verse 2; Able, who it is said in verse 4 also **“obtained the testimony”**; Enoch, who also **“obtained the witness”** in verse 5 and finally all those of whom the word was not worthy because of their faith (11:38) who **“gained approval”** or “obtained the good report.” Notice in each of these cases it is something that was done to them or for them. It was not their work that obtained this good report, but someone else spoke this of them.

So, the answer to the second question, who accepted these people, who gave this good report of their faith is found for us in part in verse 4, where it is said of Able that **“God testifying about his gifts...”** It is God who active seeks out, imparts faith in the believer and then accepts those who live by faith with approval. Beloved, this is the great testimony of Scripture, that the righteous, as we read in Hebrews 10:38, will live how? By faith. One of the best examples of this is found in the books of Romans, Galatians and James, where it is said of the patriarch –

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**For what does the Scripture say? ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (Romans 4:3; see also Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23).**

What was the good report given of Abraham? Abraham believed, he had faith in the promises, he looked forward to those things that he had not yet seen and lived in light of them and this faith was “**credited**” – “reckoned” to him as righteousness. Abraham found acceptance with God not because of what he did or could do for God, but because of what he trusted God to do for him. Beloved, this is the gospel – not what we do for God, but what God does for us. By faith we believe that God sent His Son Jesus, to explain the Father, reveal our sin, to pay the penalty for our sin, to send the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower believers to live for God rather than for self. The point is this, if the “old ones” found acceptance with God, not by their sorry attempts to keep the Law of Moses as many of these first readers were attempting, and not through the merits of one’s own religion, as many do today, but rather by faith, by a *firm and fully confident trust in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ*, how much more ought we to seek acceptance with God via the same faith?

And let us be clear, that faith is not a work, for the Scriptures testify of this in Romans 4:4-5 where we read –

**4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...**

Faith in God, not man’s efforts, has always been the means of salvation. As John Calvin wrote concerning this –

*Let us bear in mind that the main point and the very hinge on which [Hebrews 11’s] argument turns on this, that all the fathers from the beginning of the world, were approved by God in no other way than by being united to Him by faith.*

Again, we see that faith alone saves, but even as we come to see, it is never by faith which is alone. Faith saves and then faith works, not to be saved, but to show the assurance and evidence of salvation. And this faith that works is the only means by which a person is made right with God. Faith saves and then faith sustains; faith looks only unto God and then longs to serve only God; faith sees the promise of the future and seeks to live in light of them in the present; faith affects our lives and causes us to be accepted in the Beloved, the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **IV. Faith is awareness (3)**

*By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.*

Faith is assurance, action, acceptance and finally, it is awareness as we read that, *by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God...*” We might ask ourselves here, “what does the subject of creation have to do with faith?”

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Isn't amazing that before our text launches into this list of persons who lived by faith, it is as if we are being confronted with the question, "do we listen by faith?" If we are to live by faith, then we must have faith in the very first pages of Scripture, the very first utterances of God, utterances by which God brought this world into existence. By faith, by this assurance, by this action, by this acceptance by God to now live for Him, we are now by faith to be aware that God created all things, the "**worlds**" or "ages" and all things that are seen, *ex nihilo*, that is "out of nothing." Psalm 33:6 says, "*By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.*" There was no one else there. No man saw creation. As man comes on the scene six days after God first spoke creation, he was presented with an already existing universe. Even Adam had to take it "by faith" that God created all things out of nothing.

If we cannot accept the opening pages of Scripture by faith, then how will we ever be able to accept any of the promises of God by faith. Therefore, we are reminded that it is by faith that we must understand, have an awareness that God created, and He prepared, fashioned, and shaped this world for His glory and our benefit. The creation of the world must be believed by faith. It is something we hope for as well as something we have not seen yet believe. Beloved, a life of faith begins with creation because the fact that God is the Creator is one of the fundamental characteristics of God. The Scriptures teach us that the power and nature of God is revealed in creation. Are we aware of the fingerprints of God everywhere we look? We can only do so by faith.

These then are the fundamental of the description of faith – faith is assurance in the person and promises of God through Jesus Christ; faith is action, an seeing of the evidence, or proof those things you believe in your heart; faith is acceptance, knowing that we are made righteous before God not by what we do, but what we believe God has done for us in Christ; and finally faith is awareness, seeing from the very beginning the hand of God, from the creation of the world, to the recreation of my sinful heart, I am aware of the evidences of God's love in my life. Let me close with this quote from John Piper who expresses well the faith we ought to be cultivating in our lives –

*Here's what faith does, it sees the fingerprints of God at work in the details of life so that the believer gains new strength to persevere as a Christian. Faith lays hold of God. It is not the power of positive thinking but a genuine perception of the Lord, seeing Him at work, tasting of His goodness, gazing upon His glory, and being satisfied in His beauty.*

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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