

PERSEVERING FAITH

Hebrews 11:1–7 • Pastor Luke Herche

Well, please turn with me in your Bibles if you would to the book of Hebrews, Hebrews Chapter 11. Our sermon text for this morning will be Hebrews 11 verses one through seven. Hebrews 11 is probably the most known chapter in the Book of Hebrews, sometimes called the Hall of Faith because it recounts how God, people of old, walked by faith, keeping their eyes on the promises. Before we read Hebrews 11, let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you Father, for your promises. We thank you for your love for us, your Grace that is ours in Jesus for the gift of your spirit, for the hope of the resurrection and the renewal of all things and Father, we pray that you would come and speak to us now that you would, that you would renew our minds that you would open our hearts that you would give us ears to hear and minds to grasp and hearts to receive your Grace offered to us in the gospel and we pray Father, that you would pour out your spirit on us to that end, that you would give me the words to say and give us the ears to hear that you would, that you would draw our hearts to you this morning and we pray these things in Jesus' name Amen.

Again, Hebrews 11 Beginning with verse one verses one through seven:

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

What is faith?

You know, sometimes people talk about faith in humanity or faith in progress or faith, or lack thereof in the government or the legal system or the educational system. And in all of these cases, faith is a belief in something, not just believing that it exists, but believing in the ideas which stand behind it, believing that it is right, believing that it will work, and so on. It is in this sense that people talk about putting your faith in something as if you will naturally believe in something, the question is just in what do you believe? At the end of the day, what you trust to come through? That's true in the big things and in the little. I mean, even right now I am trusting Zoom to get this message to you, right we are trusting this system to work.

There is some truth to this idea of faith. Faith is belief, in. It is trusting that something, or rather someone, will come through in the end. Faith is that, but it is also more than that. Faith in Scripture is a way of seeing. It requires my imagination to be engaged to see what is unseen, which the writer of Hebrews will say is of the essence of faith. Faith is a way of seeing. It is an orientation. And if we are to persevere in the Christian life, we must do so by such faith.

Now we need to persevere because the Christian life is hard because life is hard and becoming a Christian doesn't change that. It changes us but not our circumstances. In fact, sometimes becoming a Christian makes life more difficult. We suddenly face rejection and ridicule for our faith, suddenly there are conflicts with our culture that weren't there before or conflicts with family members that weren't there before, or we enter into a battle with our own sin that at times seems unwinnable. And so we begin to think, 'is it worth it?' And so, the writer of Hebrews in Chapter 10, just a few verses before what we read in Chapter 10, verse 35 said **do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward**. You see, he wants us to persevere in faith, unto the reward. And Chapter 11 is our encouragement to do just that. First by explanation and then by example. And so, the writer wants us to encourage us, he wants to encourage us to live by faith. And to that end this morning he points us to faith's orientation, faith's action, faith's commendation, and faith's rewards. So we'll look at those four things, one at a time: faith's orientation, faith's action, Faith's commendation, and faith's reward.

First, faith's orientation.

There are two ways of approaching life. The first is to live as if this age is all there is to set one mind on the flesh, as Paul puts it. To act as if the concerns of this present age are the only concerns that matter. This is the way that most of us live day by day, if we're honest, right? We get caught up in the problems of this age, we look to the solutions of this age, we hope in the betterment of this age. Everything is focused on

life under the sun. What matters most is what we can see and taste and touch and hear, and smell. We value people by how smart or strong or beautiful or rich or funny or well connected they are. We are controlled by fear, fearing anything that can take away our health or security or happiness in the present. We live life trying to maneuver and manipulate and control our circumstances to make things go our way for our purposes. We walk by sight and set our minds on the flesh that is on the present age.

And of course, it's easy to live this way. Sight brings certain realities to our mind. The world presents itself to our five senses, and it imposes itself upon us and it calls for us to respond, to react to deal with what we call reality. Scripture presents for us another way of being in the world. Paul says, **we walk by faith and not by sight**, (2 Corinthians 5:7). In the same book he says, "we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." [2 Corinthians 4:18], which of course, implies that faith is a kind of sight. Paul says we look to the things that are unseen. To look to what is unseen is the act of faith. And by that I don't mean that faith pretends that unseen things are real, I mean that faith sees what is unseen. Listen to Paul's prayer in Ephesians chapter one. He's praying for the Ephesians and he prays, **"that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,"** (Ephesians 1:17-18).

See, we don't need the eyes of our flesh open, we need the eyes of our hearts opened. We need to learn to see with the eyes of faith; that the great danger of man is not physical blindness, but spiritual blindness. And some have said spiritual blindness is a greater danger because when men are physically blind, they know it. Well, Jesus came to give sight to the blind to open the eyes of our hearts to enable us to walk by faith and not by sight.

Now faith is not then empty speculation about invisible realities, rather it is taking God at His Word. We see this in our text this morning in two places; first in verse 3 the writer says, **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**. How does the writer know that? Well, because he has read about it in the Book of Genesis. In fact, half of this chapter is recounting things that happened in the Book of Genesis. He's not making this stuff up; he is trusting God's Word. Faith takes God at His Word, and it believes in realities that are not seen.

Noah did the same thing in verse seven we read **By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark**. See Noah took God at His word, even though he had no physical proof that what God

foretold was going to happen. He believed God's word and acted upon it. Now for the especially skeptical out there, let me say this: this is actually the way that we do life all the time. Much of what we know is based on the testimony of others. And so, you listen to the news and then you say to a friend, "Did you hear what happened today?" And they, and then you tell them and they respond, "Oh, how did you know?" And you respond, "Well, I heard it on the news." Now I realize nowadays that's a little like saying "I read it on the Internet." But if you simply start thinking of all the things that you know that you yourself cannot prove, it will quickly become obvious how much we rely on the testimony of others. Now, you might legitimately respond, "Oh, but other people can prove those things." Okay, how do you know? You see, really very often the question is not "Can I myself prove this?" but "Can I trust the source of this information?" And of course, when it comes to God's Word, the writer of Hebrews says we can trust Him. We can trust what God has said and we can trust Him because He is faithful. Hebrews chapter 10, verse 23, just in the last chapter, the writer said, **"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."**

There is a maxim that is sometimes used in the business world that the best predictor of future performance is past performance, right? And you can see this has a kind of common sense ring to it, and this is how you build trust with people, isn't it right, by repeated faithfulness to your word. And once you have demonstrated that faithfulness you have proven yourself faithful. God is faithful. He keeps His promises and if we have any doubt of that, just look at the Cross and the Resurrection. We see numerous prophecies fulfilled in Jesus' work and the Resurrection was God being faithful to His promises to His people. He promised life to the righteous. And then comes a righteous one, Jesus. And His reward is life, just as God had promised.

This is why the writer begins by saying in verse one, **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.** When we take God at His Word, we are sure that that for which we hope will come about. God has promised, He will do it. God has particularly spoken about things which we cannot see. And by that, the text does not primarily mean things that are invisible by nature. It can mean that. So, for example, the Bible speaks about the human soul. We cannot see the human soul, but we know that they exist, in part, because God says they do. Verse three can be taken this way, right? How do we know that the universe was made by God's word out of invisible things, because God says so and God is faithful? And yet, if we were there in the beginning, we could have watched it all happen. The creation of the world is not intrinsically invisible. It is invisible to us because we weren't there. The same can be said for God's promises.

Verse seven says, **By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen.** They would be seen, but as yet they were not. God promises will come

about, but we do not yet see them. Psalm 8 promises that all things will be put under the feet of Jesus as the writer of Hebrews understands it. And Hebrews 2:8-9 says, **"At present we do not yet see everything in subjection to Him."** But of course every eye will see, just not yet.

And so faith right, by taking God at His Word, by believing His promises, is oriented toward the future. Hence faith is the assurance of things hoped for.

And at the same time those future things are currently in heaven. Peter says our inheritance is kept in heaven for us, which means that faith is oriented toward heaven as well. Which is to say faith orientation is both upward and forward. And Colossians 3 captures this dual perspective and Colossians 3:1-4, Paul says **If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.** See the orientation of faith is to believe the word of God, especially the promises of God, and so set our minds on things above and things to come upward and forward.

Just consider with me for a moment why that is so difficult. Again, the stuff of this age presents itself to our senses nonstop. We are daily assaulted with the sights and the sounds and the smells of the present age. We don't have to bring them to mind, they force themselves on our mind from the moment we wake up in the morning. But not so with faith. If Paul says in Colossians, **"seek the things that are above"** and again, **"set your minds on things above."** We can be passive in the exercise of sight, but we must be active in the exercise of faith. We must daily remind ourselves and one another to be oriented upward and forward, lest we be drawn into the present age and forget that there is more to life than what our own eyes can see.

Well, that's faith's orientation, right, upward and forward. Second faith's action.

Some people think of faith as essentially passive. I believe certain things and well, that's that. And of course, faith is believing certain things right. Above all else, it is believing in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. It is setting your eyes on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father and waiting for things to come when Christ will return. But in the meantime, faith is incredibly active. You see an orientation to things unseen is not, therefore, apathetic to things seen. Faith is not works, but faith always works. Faith always works itself out in time and space. And if you believe in the value of things above and things to come, that will shape the way I act here and now.

And notice that the three people mentioned in our text this morning their upward and forward orientation shaped their actions here and now. So that their actions too

end up being godward along with their faith. So verse four, we read, **"By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,"** Now Old Testament scholars debate just exactly what made Abel's sacrifice better. But if we just stick to the text in Genesis 1, I think it's actually fairly clear, Cain offered simply the fruit of the ground. Abel offered the first born of his flock and their fat portions. Cain could have brought the first fruits; that was something that was commanded in the Old Testament law to bring the first fruits, but he did not do that. Abel brought the best of the best that fat portions of the first born, and the point is Abel gave his all. He gave his best. Faith does not relegate God to seconds; it doesn't give God leftovers. Rather it gives God the best of our time and talents and treasures. Why is that? Because faith is oriented to a God of glory. And faith, keeping God in sight, recognizes the supreme value of God and the relative value of all creation. So what do you value above all else? That will shape your actions; that will shape the way you live. Abel, seeing the supreme value of the glory of God, offered to God the best of what he had.

Well, second you have Enoch right. Enoch pleased God or as the Book of Genesis puts it, Enoch walked with God. And he did that by faith as verse six tells us. And in Enoch we see that faith is oriented toward God as a person, right? Abels offering shows us God value, but Enochs walk shows us God personhood, right? And that in two ways that the Hebrew of Genesis says Enoch walked with God. That's a personal thing. That the picture is of two people walking side-by-side doing life together. The Greek, though of Genesis picked up by the Book of Hebrews, says Enoch pleased God, but that again demonstrates God, personhood. He was pleased with Enoch. So Faith sees God as a person with whom you walk, not a power that you employ, or a blind fate which you begrudgingly accept, but a person with whom you walk and whom you please.

And finally, **Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark.** And Can you imagine building a boat in the desert that that only makes sense if he is taking God at His word? Otherwise, it's ludicrous, and surely some of Noah's contemporaries thought so. But Noah acted based off of the reality of the Word of God, and so acting on faith means living in light of God's glory, walking with God as a person and taking God at His word.

Now you know the challenge to this right. We make decisions every day based on the data that we have at hand, or as Paul Tripp is fond of saying, "we don't live based on the truth, but based off of our interpretation of the truth." And so if we look at the world as if this age is all there is, we will act to secure the goods of this world by the means this world has to offer us. Our lives will be filled with making sure this life works the way we want it to by the methods that are available to us. And I'm sure Cain could have given you a very logical reason for why he gave as he did. Maybe he

had a big family after all, and who would feed his family if he gave his first fruits to God? Or maybe he was entertaining that evening and he had to put out a good spread to impress the neighbors. I don't know what it was, but when this life is all there is, our goal is to get the most out of this age by the methods of this age. And being distracted by walking with God or pleasing God, well, that just sounds like one more person to please, no thank you. And building a boat when it's not even raining in the middle of the desert, what a waste of time. That doesn't seem like a sure bet, right? Why not spend my time getting ahead in this life rather than preparing for something that is statistically improbable at best.

See again walking by faith and walking by sight are opposed to one another. Now they're not quite equal opposites, of course, walking by physical sight I have one set of data: what I can see with my eyes. Walking by faith, there's actually two right? I understand and assess the scene things, but I do so in light of the unseen things. It's not that we don't take into account the needs, the realities, the opportunities of this age, but they are all interpreted in light of the age to come. They are not absolute. And so, faith's orientation is upward and forward and faith's action takes that into account. God is a bigger reality in our decision-making process than money or reputation or happiness or anything else this present age has to offer us.

That brings us to third, faith's commendation.

About five times our writer mentions "commendation" in these seven verses. Now, "commendation" is praise, or it is acknowledging something good about another, commending that person. And there are probably two, at least two, options here for what our writer is talking about when he mentions commendation. And both of them are true. I'm just not entirely sure which our writer means here. So the first option is that our writer, by using the phrase **commended as righteous** in verse four, is speaking about justification by faith, that the doctrine that we call justification by faith using Paul's language. In verse 2, the writer says by faith the **people of old received their commendation**. And then in verse four, he says **"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 in this view, if this language of commendation is about justification by faith, God commending us for the as righteous in Christ, it has this to say for it. Back in Genesis 4:4, we are told that God had regard for Abel and his offering. It's not that God was pleased with his offering and so accepted Abel. It's really the other way around. God had regard for Abel and his offering. And Hebrews 11:4 doesn't say God commended Abel because of his offering, but by accepting it, which would be like saying this, God demonstrated his acceptance of Abel by accepting his offering. And you see, according to Scripture, we are righteous and therefore accepted by God, not because of our work, but because of Jesus. We in ourselves, are disobedient and

guilty, but Jesus obeyed in our place, took our guilt, and offers us His standing as right just before the Father. Our works are accepted by the Father because we are accepted, not the other way around. Hence, Noah is an heir of the righteousness that is by faith that righteousness is a gift. He is an heir, not an earner. Noah did not work for that righteousness, he received it as a gift, and that is true.

And yet, the other way of taking these texts, however (which doesn't deny all of that. It doesn't deny any of it as theological truth.), but it is a shade different in understanding what the writer is getting at. The other way of taking these texts, however, is to see the commendation, not as an equivalent of justification, but as the recognition that in the end, our judgment will not be by works, but nevertheless, according to them. It's a distinction that theologians make that were not judged by works but were judged according to them. And that is that our works demonstrate that we belong to Christ. Put differently, our works do not make us righteous, but they do demonstrate our righteousness in Christ. Or as James put it, we show our faith by our works by living in light of the realities we confess. And one day God will commend His children for the work that we do. We don't become Gods' children by our works. God does not save us because of our work. But for those who persevere in faith, trusting in the righteousness of Jesus, struggling to live, however imperfectly, according to unseen realities, and not merely the seen ones, God will commend us on the last day. God will say on that day, "Well done, good and faithful servant." He will accept the work that we have done not because it was sinless, not because it earns us a place in heaven, but on account of His Son and for the glory of His Son, He receives the works of those in His Son.

And that is an encouragement to keep going. God is pleased with your work for Him. The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it like this. It says "the persons of believers being accepted through Christ their good works also are accepted in him. Not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unremovable in God's sight, but that He [God] looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections." God will one day say, "Well done, good and faithful servant". Your actions are pleasing to the Father.

Now you might think, "But I'm so messed up, I'm so broken, I'm so sinful, I fail so often." But the baby steps of faith are pleasing to the Father. I realize there's a difference between the moral action and moral failure and the physical action of a baby, but there is an analogy here. When a baby is learning to walk, parents don't chastise them when they fall down. They simply delight in whatever steps they take. When we walk by faith, the Father says, "Well done. Keep going. Good job. Don't give up. Keep trying. Well done, good and faithful servant." And so faith's orientation is upward, and forward, faith's acts are based on those realities, and faith is

commended by God as having pleased him as it does so. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Keep going, persevere, don't give up."

4th and finally you have faith's reward.

There is a reward to faith. And there are two ways of getting this wrong, of course, right? The one says "You can earn God's favor' you can earn such rewards." And the other says, "Well, you can't earn God's favor and so it doesn't matter what you do anyway." And it's true, you cannot earn God's favor. It is a gift in Christ. It is His grace. And yet, it does matter what you do. There is a reward waiting for those who persevere in faith. Just consider some of the New Testament verses that talk about this. Matthew 6:3-4, Jesus says, **"But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."** Luke 6:35 Jesus says, **"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil."** 1 Corinthians chapter 3 Paul says, **each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.** Wherein Hebrews, just the last chapter 10:35, **Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.** Or Hebrews 11:6 in our text, **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.** The only way to please God, our writer says, is to believe that He rewards those who seek Him.

Now again, this is not a reward that we earn or deserve. Even our reward is a gift of grace and it's not a fleshly reward. This is not a cash prize at the end of the Christian life. In fact, the reward is life with God. The prize is life in the presence of our Father. We see that already in our three examples. Abel, though dead, still speaks. How so? Revelation Chapter 6 says that there are martyrs in heaven crying out to God. Abel, though dead, still speaks because he has life in the presence of the Father. Enoch was taken up so that he did not see death. What was his reward? Life in the presence of the Father. Even Noah and his family in an earthly way received temporal life, which is a sign and a type of the life to come.

Now these men, either in type or reality, all received life. Each received a kind of resurrection. Abel, though dead still speaks. Enoch was translated out of this life directly into the next. Noah and his family came through the flood waters of death into the new life, into a new world. And yet, of course, each of those is just a picture; a picture of true resurrection life. Jesus died for sin and rose to newness of life. He now enjoys fullness of life at the Father's right hand. Hebrews 12:2 will say that **"for the joy**

set before him he endured the cross." He too kept His eye on the reward. We must do the same thing.

Faith's orientation is upward and forward. We look not to the things that are seen, but to the unseen. Faith's action lives in light of those unseen realities: living for God's glory. Walking in God's presence, trusting in God's Word. Faith's Commendation is those words we longed to hear "Well done, good and faithful servant." Faith's reward is the promise that it will all be worth it in the end.

Yes, there is a hard struggle now. Yes, life sometimes feels like death. But though we die with Christ, yet we will live with him. Keep your eye on the reward. The only way to persevere through trials is to keep your eye on the end.

Paul said in Romans 8 he said before **I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.** That is ours in Christ that is ours by faith. Live in that hope. Keep your eye on that hope.

Let's pray,

Our Father, we pray that you would strengthen our faith. Give us eyes to see the unseen. Help us to believe your promises, and know that they are sure and trust that they are coming. Help us to hope in them as we look up to where Jesus is seated at your right hand and as we look forward to His return when He will come back and make all things new and we will enter into our rest. Father, keep our eyes there, give us eyes to see open the eyes of our hearts we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.