

In our study of Hebrews we have come to the final three chapters. Chapter 11 emphasizes the importance of faith. Chapter 12 emphasizes the importance of hope. And Chapter 13 emphasizes the importance of love. Many commentators have called Hebrews, Chapter 11, the “faith chapter” of the Bible. So in the weeks ahead, let’s learn more about faith and how to apply it.

Today: “Faith – what is it?”

OUR TEXT

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. 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. By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

The opening verse is a powerful statement about faith. It is not so much a definition of faith as it is an explanation of how it works. Faith is assurance and conviction (NASB), or as other translations have it, faith is “confidence” (NIV) or “substance” and “evidence” (KJV), or “certainty” (Phillips). The point of all, is that faith must operate in such a way as to give us surety in our future when we are trusting in God. We can’t see what is hoped for in the future, but faith gives us surety or confidence in what God has promised.

And that brings us to a better definition of faith. Warren Wiersbe has suggested the following, and I find it very helpful:

FAITH IS CONFIDENT OBEDIENCE TO GOD’S WORD, IN SPITE OF CIRCUMSTANCE OR CONSEQUENCE

This confirms the teaching of Paul in Romans 10:17 when he says “*faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.*” In other words, faith grows as we fully trust the truths of God’s Word and act accordingly. Faith, then, is very much related to God’s will as disclosed in the Bible.

Let me give you a question to ponder. Is faith more about believing “God will” or that “God can” do something? Don’t answer immediately – think about it.

Since it says in 11:1 that faith is “assurance” and “conviction” about the unseen, we might be tempted to reply that we must believe that “God will” do something, and the more we truly believe in it happening, it will. This reminds me of an evangelist I saw in action at a multi-day event many years ago, teaching on faith.

Here was the essence of his teaching, which he encouraged us to memorize, which I did. I want to ask you what you think about it. He taught us: “Faith is believing something is so, when it is not so, in order for it to be so.” In other words, he was teaching: “faith is believing so confidently in God doing something that it surely will come to pass.”

How many times have you heard “if you just have enough faith...” or “if you just have faith as a mustard seed” anything can happen. This is the premise of so many faith healers: enough faith equals results from God. But the problem with this teaching is that God’s performance depends upon your measure of faith. In this philosophy you and your faith is what is going to cause God to

make something happen.

I have come to realize that the evangelist's claim that "faith is believing something is so, when it is not so, in order for it to be so" is not only wrong, it is heresy. This is because it takes the miracle away from God and puts it in the hand of the faith believer.

All of this is to help you understand that faith is not about believing "God will." Rather, we must rather believe that "God can" and then will, if it indeed is His will to do so.

PRINCIPLES OF FAITH FROM VERSE 6

Now let's examine verse 6 of our passage and see that we can learn much about what true faith is.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

1. **FAITH IS ABOUT PLEASING GOD** (not making something happen)
2. **FAITH IS ABOUT BELIEVING IN GOD** (not about the miracle we desire)
3. **FAITH IS ABOUT SEEKING GOD'S WILL** (not asking for my will)

4 EXAMPLES OF FAITH (from v 3-5, 7)

1. Our faith re: creation (3)

Note this first example of faith. It is not about making something happen. It is about believing that God created the universe out of nothing, based upon the account in His Word. We can't see God, or explain scientifically how the universe came into being. But faith, if exercised, allows us to be confident in what God's Word teaches us about creation and God's role in it.

Here, faith is about "God can" (and did).

2. Abel's faith re: his sacrifice (4)

The story of Abel and Cain, Adam and Eve's first two children, is found in Genesis 4. Cain was born first, with Abel following. Cain brought an offering of his farming to God and Abel brought an offering of his ranching to God – the first of his flock, sacrificed. The Bible says that God had regard for Abel and his offering, but no regard for Cain and his offering. And Cain was so angry that he killed his brother. (This is the first example of "the cowboy and the farmer should be friends" – but they were not!) We might determine this to be unfair on God's part, but we see more of the story when we read further. In Genesis 4:6-7 it has God saying to Cain, *"Why are you angry and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door ... but you must master it."* You see, Cain did not please God because he did not "do well," whereas his brother Abel did "do well." Cain sinned in not "doing well," then in becoming angry, and then in resorting to murder. The lesson in faith here is about PLEASING GOD and DOING HIS WILL – not in hoping for some miraculous outcome.

3. Enoch's faith re: pleasing God (5)

The account of Enoch, the seventh from Adam (God's perfect number!) is brief in Genesis. It simply says "Enoch walked with God and he was not, for God took him." From that alone we might not even be sure that he didn't die. He surely went younger than his contemporaries (a young 365). But our Hebrews passage clarifies that Enoch did not see death, and that this was BY FAITH. Faith in what? Well, it says simply that Enoch was pleasing to God. By faith, Enoch lived a life style that earned him an early departure from this life, because he pleased God more than his contemporaries. Here again we learn that faith is not believing in some miraculous outcome, but it is PLEASING GOD and DOING HIS WILL.

4. Noah's faith re: building the ark (7)

The last of the examples in today's passage (though there are many more to come in chapter 11) is Noah. By faith, Noah built an ark. What he didn't do by faith was ask God to build it for

him miraculously. Noah went to work for 600 years. His faith was that he trusted God when God said a flood was coming (what was a flood?, what was rain?) despite the consequences of ridicule. Noah's faith was PLEASING GOD and DOING HIS WILL.

We will continue to see this pattern of faith throughout the rest of chapter 11. And these examples of Biblical faith are also shown in the miracles that Jesus performed on so many.

You might know that Matthew is only generally chronological, and is much more subject oriented. In chapters 8 and 9 we see a number of his miracles that other gospels record as being over the course of a number of years. But in this density of miracles given in Matthew 8-9, we see a pattern of faith that supports the pattern of faith in Hebrews 11. Let's look at just a few.

The Miracles of Matthew 8 & 9

A leper (8:2-3) "Lord, if you are willing You can make me clean"

Jesus: "I am willing; be cleansed"

Faith in the ABILITY and WILL OF GOD

A centurion for his servant (8:5-13) "Just say the word and my servant will be healed, for I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me ..."

Jesus: "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel"

Faith in the AUTHORITY and WILL OF GOD

Woman with a hemorrhage (9:20-22) "If I only touch His garment, I will get well"

Jesus: "Your faith has made you well"

Faith in the ABILITY OF GOD

Two blind men (9:27-30) "Have mercy on us"

Jesus: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?"

Blind men: Yes, Lord"

Jesus: "It shall be done to you according to your faith"

Faith in the ABILITY OF GOD

Again we see: Faith is not "God will" do something, but "God can" if He so wills

Does God perform miracles today? Of course He does – more than we even know.

But they are by His choosing and in His perfect timing.

They are based on God wanting to "reward" His own who please Him.

And that pleasing is by faith in believing that He is God, and that He is able.

And His ultimate miracle is always the transformation of a person from spiritual death to life!

**Remember: FAITH IS CONFIDENT OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD,
IN SPITE OF CIRCUMSTANCE OR CONSEQUENCE**

(It is not "believing something is so, when it's not so, in order for it to be so";
nor is it "faith healing" – believing enough to make something happen)

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