

"NOW FAITH IS..."

I. Introduction

- A. Nearly one hundred years ago, J. Gresham Machen gave the following description of how many people in his day thought about faith: "Faith is being exalted so high to-day that men are being satisfied with any kind of faith, just so it is faith. It makes no difference what is believed, we are told, just so the blessed attitude of faith is there." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 141]
1. This way of thinking about faith is not just a thing of the past.
 2. There are plenty of people in the world today who would proudly say that their lives are greatly enhanced by their faith but who, at the same time, have no interest in thinking critically about what they believe or why they believe it.
 3. Now it is true that a generic kind of faith may bring people psychological benefits for a time, but sooner or later the object of their faith will prove to be either reliable or unreliable.
 4. The key thing about faith is whether or not the object upon which it rests is trustworthy.
- B. In light of this, it is extremely important that our thinking about faith be informed by what the Bible has to say on the subject.
1. Some of the Bible's most important teaching on faith is found in Hebrews 11.
 2. This chapter flows directly out of what the writer was talking about back in chapter 10, which ended with this assertion: "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." (v. 39)

3. That verse makes it clear that faith is a matter of the utmost importance.
4. Faith is what makes the difference between those who are destroyed and those who are preserved.
5. Here in chapter 11, the writer encourages us to persevere in faith by describing the faith of numerous Old Testament saints.
6. As we study the first seven verses of this chapter tonight, we will learn three things about true faith: faith is the conviction of things not seen; faith is the foundation of all knowledge; and faith is how we receive commendation from God.

II. The Conviction of Things Not Seen

- A. We begin by looking at verse 1, where the writer says that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
 1. When rightly understood, this statement stands in sharp contrast to a common misunderstanding that many people have about faith.
 2. This misunderstanding is reflected in one dictionary’s definition of faith as “unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence.”
 3. According to this dictionary, faith is opposed to reason.
 4. This is not how the Bible talks about faith.
 5. In Scripture, faith has both intellectual content and relational commitment.
 6. A Christian’s faith in God involves believing a certain set of doctrines because we are convinced that it is reasonable to put our trust in God.
 7. Faith is not opposed to reason.

8. On the contrary, as C.S. Lewis once explained, “Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods.” [cited in Collins, *Science and Faith*, 38]
- B. When the writer of Hebrews says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, he is not giving an all-encompassing definition of faith.
1. There are important aspects of saving faith that are not even mentioned in this statement.
 2. If you are looking for a good summary of what the Bible has to say about saving faith, it is hard to beat the one that is provided in our Shorter Catechism: “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.” [WSC 86]
 3. Here in Hebrews 11:1, the writer is not so much defining faith as he is describing how it functions in the lives of God’s people.
 4. He is telling us that having faith in God means taking him at his Word when he promises to do something for you.
 5. Faith always has a future-looking orientation because it involves trusting that God will bring about that which you have yet to fully experience.
 6. As Calvin puts it, “faith directs us to things afar off which we do not as yet enjoy.”
- C. The fact that faith functions in this way means that it is important for us to be frequently filling our minds with the promises of God.
1. Our faith is strengthened as we think about and meditate upon the invisible things that we believe to be true.

2. Because we cannot see these things, it is very easy for them to seem less real to us.
3. The things that we can see are always before our eyes, and if we are not careful those earthly concerns will cloud our vision and cause us to lose sight of God's promises.
4. You don't want to be in that condition when trouble or affliction comes into your life.
5. At that point, you will be so overwhelmed by your earthly concerns that the things that are invisible will seem utterly irrelevant to you.
6. This is why we need to hear and reflect upon God's gospel promises again and again and again.
7. If we are not continually setting the things that we cannot see before our eyes, we will lose sight of those things.

III. The Foundation of All Knowledge

- A. We turn now to the second thing that this passage teaches us about faith: faith is the foundation of all knowledge.
 1. We see this in the statement that the writer makes in verse 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."
 2. God spoke the world into existence.
 3. As it says in Psalm 33, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm." (vs. 6, 9)
 4. God did not create the world out of pre-existing matter.
 5. He created it out of nothing.

6. He simply said, "Let there be..." and it was so.
 7. This doctrine rules out a materialistic view of universe, the view that says that everything in the universe can be explained by looking at matter and its forces.
 8. The doctrine of creation stands opposed to this because it says that matter is not eternal.
 9. Only God is eternal.
 10. Only God is self-sufficient.
 11. Everything else is contingent upon God for its existence.
 12. Of course, the materialist will ask us how we know that the doctrine of creation is true.
 13. Our passage in Hebrews provides the answer to this question: we know it by faith.
- B. Upon hearing that answer, our materialist friend will triumphantly tell us that that is why he cannot take our claims seriously.
1. He will tell us that he comes to his conclusions by studying facts, while we come to our conclusions by accepting something that cannot be proven.
 2. This is when we spring our trap on our materialist friend.
 3. We spring it by pointing out that all knowledge is ultimately founded upon faith.
 4. How can he be certain that he really exists?
 5. How can he know that his observations of the world have any correspondence to reality?

6. He cannot prove that these things are true.
 7. This leads Charles Hodge to explain that the truth of God is “the foundation of all knowledge. That our senses do not deceive us; that consciousness is trustworthy in what it teaches; that anything is what it appears to be; that our existence is not a delusive dream, has no other foundation than the truth of God. In this sense, all knowledge is founded on faith, i.e., the belief that God is true.” [*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 487]
- C. Another thing that needs to be pointed out is that thinking and knowing are functions of the heart.
1. Scripture tells us that the heart is the center of our inner life, the control center for our mind, our feelings, and our will.
 2. As it says in Proverbs 4:23, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”
 3. Everything about us flows out of our hearts.
 4. Therefore, as Old Testament scholar C. John Collins explains, “our heart’s disposition — our loyalties, our likes and dislikes — will play a part in our thinking and knowing.” [*Science and Faith*, 37]
 5. In other words, there is no such thing as complete objectivity.
 6. This is another reason why faith always plays a crucial role in a person’s thought process.
 7. The materialist’s insistence upon the eternity of matter is not something that can be scientifically verified.
 8. He has been driven to that conclusion by the disposition of his heart.
 9. In other words, it is a matter of faith.

IV. How We Receive Commendation from God

- A. This brings us to the third thing that this passage teaches us about faith: faith is how we receive commendation from God.
1. The writer introduces this idea in verse 2 and he then goes on to illustrate it by the three examples that he gives in verses 4-7.
 2. When the writer speaks of receiving commendation, he is not talking about being commended by men but being commended, or approved, by God.
 3. God commended Abel when he accepted his offering.
 4. God commended Enoch when he kept him from seeing death by taking him up into heaven.
 5. God commended Noah when he saved him from the deluge.
 6. Those Old Testament believers were accepted by God because they trusted in God's promises.
 7. The Hebrew Christians needed to consider what this meant for them if they were to turn back from following Christ.
 8. The promises that God made to Old Testament saints have now reached their fulfillment in Christ.
 9. To abandon Christ is to leave the path of faith, and faith is the only way to receive commendation from God.
- B. Let's turn now to look briefly at the three examples of Old Testament faith that are described in our text.
1. The first example is Abel, the son of Adam and Eve who was murdered by his brother Cain.

2. While God accepted Abel's offering, he did not accept Cain's offering.
 3. There have been different opinions on why God accepted the one but not the other.
 4. John Owen thought that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because it was a sacrifice that involved the shedding of blood, while Cain merely brought an offering of crops.
 5. John Calvin thought that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because it was offered in faith, while Cain's offering was merely an external act.
 6. Both of these interpretations have merit, but I think that Calvin's makes better sense in light of what is said here in Hebrews 11.
 7. God accepted Abel's gifts because of Abel's faith.
 8. If Abel had not had justifying faith, his inward imperfection would have rendered his worship unacceptable.
 9. As Calvin reminds us, "no works, coming from us, can please God, until we ourselves are received into favour... no works are deemed just before God, but those of a just man."
 10. The writer also says that Abel still speaks through his faith even though he died.
 11. This is an allusion to Genesis 4:10, where God tells Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."
 12. F.F. Bruce helpfully explains this part of our text by saying that "Our author's point appears to be that Abel is still appealing to God for vindication, until he obtains it in full in the judgment to come." [Bruce, 283-4]
- C. The second example of Old Testament faith is that of Enoch, the seventh generation from Adam through Seth, through whom the line of promise

was traced.

1. When we read the genealogy of the line of promise in Genesis 5, our attention is drawn to the fact that the pattern that is seen in all of the other names in the list is broken when we get to Enoch.
 2. Instead of saying that Enoch lived and died, the text says, "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." (5:24)
 3. Enoch was spared from death because he pleased God.
 4. This does not mean that Enoch merited God's favor.
 5. As the writer makes clear in verse 6, it is impossible to please God without faith.
 6. Enoch gained acceptance with God because he trusted in God's promise.
 7. He believed that God exists and that God rewards those who seek him.
 8. Many people today will say that they believe that God exists, but many of them live as practical atheists.
 9. True faith involves believing that the one true God really will save you, that he cares for you, that he hears your prayers and delivers you from evil.
 10. Such hope can only be found in Jesus Christ, which is why our faith must always remain fixed upon him.
- D. The third Old Testament example of faith in our text is Noah.
1. Noah took God at his word when God warned him about the judgment that was about to come upon the world.
 2. Even though the prospect of such a huge flood would have seemed highly unlikely, Noah spent all of those years building the ark on

the dry land.

3. Imagine the ridicule that he must have endured as his neighbors watched him carry out such a monumental task.
 4. But in the end, when the torrent was unleashed, Noah's faith was vindicated and the world was condemned.
 5. That is what will happen on the last day, when Christ comes to gather his people and to judge the world.
 6. Our faith will be vindicated, and the world will be condemned.
- E. Our passage ends by saying that Noah became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.
1. This statement gets at the heart of what the writer is saying in this text.
 2. Righteousness is the thing that we need in order to receive commendation from God.
 3. That commendation is the one thing that every human being longs for deep down in his or her heart.
 4. We all want God's approval.
 5. We all want our Creator to be pleased with us.
 6. We want to hear him saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant."
 7. The sad reality is that none of us can ever be good enough to earn God's commendation by our own performance of what he requires.
 8. We need to be clothed in the righteousness of another, the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

9. That righteousness is ours when we lay hold of God's promises by faith.
10. It is not faith that saves us, but the object of that faith: Jesus Christ and his righteousness.
11. In the words of J. Gresham Machen, "To have faith in Christ means to cease trying to win God's favor by one's own character; the man who believes in Christ simply accepts the sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 143]