

Hebrews 11:1-7      “Faith and the Unseen”  
Habakkuk 1:1-2:5  
Psalm 36

May 2, 2021

Habakkuk takes his stand at his watchtower.

In chapter 1 he brought a complaint.

He sees iniquity – the wicked surround the righteous –  
why do the wicked triumph?  
Why do the righteous suffer?  
Will wicked rulers mercilessly destroy nations forever?

And so now in chapter 2, Habakkuk wonders, what will God say in answer?

And in verse 3, God promises that if it seems slow – wait for it!

The time will come.

And as we saw in Hebrews 10, Hebrews takes the line “the *time* will come”  
and sees that the *time* is Jesus!

And until then, God’s answer is “the righteous shall live by his faith.”

And Hebrews tells us that now that Jesus *has come*, the answer is the same,  
“my righteous one shall live by faith.”

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 36 –  
a song that reflects on the same theme.

The wicked thinks that he will get away with his sin forever:

“he sets himself in a way that is not good;  
he does not reject evil.”

In response to this, the Psalmist says:

“Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens;  
your faithfulness to the clouds.”

And because of God’s steadfast love – because of his faithfulness to his promises –  
the children of man take refuge in the shadow of his wings!

In the midst of our own laments and complaints,  
we feast on the abundance of his house –  
as verse 9 says, “in your light we see light.”

So let us sing Psalm 36  
Read Hebrews 11:1-16

## **Introduction: What Is Faith?**

Do you ever wish that you could see Jesus?

Wouldn't it be nice if you could just look up into the sky and see Jesus there,  
sitting on the throne at the right hand of God the Father?

Hebrews 2:8-9 says

“At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to Jesus.  
But we see . . . Jesus . . .”

Do you see Jesus?

Hebrews says that we see Jesus!

How?

With your eyes?

No.

By faith.

Faith is the eye of the soul.

Faith enables us to see the invisible.

Because “We see . . . Jesus.”

That's what Hebrews 11 is all about.

We've seen that the two exhortations of Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10  
provide the bookends for the central exposition of Hebrews 7-10.

In the opening exhortation of 6:12,

Hebrews told us to “imitate those who with faith and patience inherit the promises.”

Likewise in the closing exhortation of 10:39,

he said, “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed,  
but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

Through faith and patience we inherit the promises.

Through faith we preserve our souls!

Faith, then, is the key—

But what is faith?

Faith is not just bare belief.

Notice that in both passages faith is connected with patience, endurance, perseverance.

True saving faith is a faith that endures until the end.

Why?

Because saving faith is all about the end!

From time to time I use the word “eschatological” to describe the church and our salvation.

Why?

Because “eschatology” means the “last things.”

And Jesus has come in “these last days” (Heb 1:2),

and everything that Jesus has done is connected to the coming of the last days.

We are the “last-days” people of God.

Our faith is that everything that God promised to do for Israel at the end of history,

God has done for Jesus in the middle of history.

What was the focus of all these heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11?

They were looking forward—

they were looking to the day when God would establish his heavenly city.

And that is what God has done in Jesus.

In other words, the end of history has come in Jesus.

The final judgment has happened to Jesus.

He has been vindicated and exalted to the right hand of God,

and so therefore, all who are in Christ participate in his “eschatological” glory.

All that belongs to Christ is yours.

You have been justified by his righteousness.

You have been consecrated or sanctified by his holiness.

The difference is that he has received these things bodily.

When you look at Jesus you see the resurrected, glorified, Son of Man.

We have received these things by faith—not yet by sight.

But it is by faith that we see the end of history

even while we still live in the middle of history.

And that is why saving faith is by definition a persevering faith—

a faith that endures until the end,

because it finds its anchor in the eschatological work of Jesus.

### **1. The Substance of Faith (11:1)**

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Hebrews 11 begins:

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Assurance is not a very good translation.

Assurance is too subjective.

The word here is “hypostasis”—

which denotes “tangible reality” as opposed to mere appearance.

We’ve seen this word twice before in Hebrews:

in 1:3, where the Son is said to be “the stamp of his substance”

and in 3:14, where we are told that we share in Christ,  
“if we hold fast the “beginning of the substance” until the end.”

In other words,

in all three places in Hebrews, this word has to do with the objective reality of something.

In chapter 1, verse 3, Jesus himself is said to be the “stamp of God’s substance” –  
and the basic reality of God is present in Jesus.

In chapter 3, verse 14, we share in Christ,

“if we hold fast the beginning of the substance until the end.”

We hold fast to the substance,

the basic reality of the Christian confession–

so that we might not fall away into rebellion.

Jesus is the stamp of God’s substance–

he is the most real thing in an age where everything seems unreal.

Faith, then, apprehends that Jesus is indeed sitting at the right hand of God.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for.

You cannot see it–but it is more real than anything you can see.

So faith is not merely the “assurance” of things hoped for.

Faith is not a mere subjective quality.

Faith is where we grasp the objective reality of who Jesus is, and what he has done.

Like with Paul, faith is contrasted with sight.

We walk by faith, not by sight–

but faith enables us to “see” as it were the objective reality

of what God has done in Christ.

The task of faith is to make an unseen reality as *real*–indeed, *more real*–

than that which is seen with the eye.

So the old word “substance” actually works rather well:

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the demonstration of things not seen.”

As Francis Schaeffer put it,

“The true basis for faith is not the faith itself,

but the work which Christ finished on the cross.” (Francis Schaeffer, GWIT, 146)

## **2. Faith and Creation (11:2-3)**

And then Hebrews launches into its famous “hall of faith.”

<sup>2</sup> For by it the people of old received their commendation. <sup>3</sup> 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.

But before launching into the heroes of the faith,  
Hebrews starts with *us*—by faith, WE understand—  
because he wants you to see that we are bound up with all the saints of ages past.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God,  
so that what is seen was not out of things that are visible.

Through the visible, we perceive the invisible hand of God.

The testimony of your senses is not the standard for truth.  
Everything you see,  
everything you touch,  
everything you smell,  
was formed from that which is unseen.  
The invisible was before all things—  
and so the testimony of your senses begins with faith.

If you think about it, why do you trust your senses?  
You have to trust your senses in order to use them.  
But you have to use them in order to trust them!  
Same with reason.  
Why do you think that the sun will come up tomorrow?  
Just because it did yesterday? And all the days of your life before?

In order to use reason — in order to use your senses —  
you have to have faith that they will work more or less properly!

The atheist just has a blind leap of faith.  
I trust my reasoning because I want to.

The Christian has a solid foundation for faith.  
Because “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.”

The Christian accepts the testimony of God that he made all things.  
The atheist accepts the testimony of man that there is no God.

Verse 3 articulates the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* — creation from nothing.  
The world that we see was not made out of pre-existing stuff.  
In the beginning, there was God.

And God spoke — and the universe came into being.  
The atheist says that the universe came about out of pre-existing stuff —  
after all, where did the Big Bang come from?

In order for “stuff” to go “bang” – from an atheistic perspective,  
there had to be a whole lot of stuff that went Bang!!

But Genesis describes something very much like a Big Bang.

We understand by faith, that when God said “Let there be light”  
BANG!!!  
There was light!

Verses 4-7 then recount the early chapters of Genesis through the lens of faith.

### **3. Faith and Drawing Near (11:4-7)**

“By faith”

Virtually every sentence starts with these words.  
None of these heroes of the faith could *see* what was promised.  
What is common to all of these “attested witnesses” of Hebrews 11  
is that they all had a hope that was based on something they could not see.

Are you relying too much on your eyes?  
Do you order your life based on what you can see?  
Faith is the demonstration (or conviction) of things not seen.  
And when you face trial and temptation,  
when God sends unexpected challenges into your life,  
do you see Jesus--  
the one who came through suffering to glory?  
Or do you only see the evidence of your senses?

The theme of verses 4-7 is “drawing near.”

By faith, Abel drew near through his acceptable sacrifice--  
and he was commended by God as righteous.  
By faith Enoch drew near, as God took him up to himself--  
and he was commended as having pleased God.  
The contrast is interesting.  
Abel is commended for his faith through dying as a martyr,  
while Enoch is commended for his faith so that he should not see death.

#### **a. Abel Offered a More Acceptable Sacrifice (v4)**

*<sup>4</sup> 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.*

Notice the relationship between faith and obedience.  
By faith Abel did what was right.  
He offered a more acceptable sacrifice.

In Genesis 4, we are told that Abel brought the firstborn of his flock –  
but Cain just brought an “offering” of the fruit of the ground.

There was nothing wrong with bringing grain –  
but the language suggests that Cain did not bring the *first* portion.  
He just brought whatever he had to spare.

If you just give to God what you have leftover of your time, your energy, your labor –  
that is not an acceptable sacrifice!

Abel was commended as righteous – God commending him by accepting his gifts.  
And Abel continues to bear witness – *through his faith*.  
By faith he did what was right –  
and through faith he continues to speak – he bears witness to us.

In contrast, Enoch did not die:

**b. Enoch Was Commended as Pleasing God (v5-6)**

<sup>5</sup> *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.* <sup>6</sup> *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.*

Enoch also was commended as having pleased God.

Now – why Enoch commended?

“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

So we know that Enoch could only have pleased God by faith.

*For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists  
and that he rewards those who seek him.*

These two points are pretty obvious, if you think about it.

Whoever would draw near to God must believe that God *is*.

If you don’t believe that God *is* – if you don’t believe that he exists –  
then you won’t draw near to God!

And likewise, you must believe that he *rewards* those who seek him.

Do you actually believe that God *is*?

Do you believe that God *is there*?

Hebrews says that this is only half of the question!

You may believe in God all right!

But do you believe that he *rewards* those who seek him?

Do you believe that gives a reward to those who seek him?!

You've seen the reward poster: "Missing dog, \$50 reward."  
If you find the dog and return him to his owner, he will reward you!

God has a reward poster: "Missing child, reward: eternal inheritance"  
If you come back, he will give you the eternal inheritance.

Abel believed this – and so he brought the first of his flock, and was murdered by his brother.  
Enoch believed this – and so God took him to himself so that he would not see death.

We are thus called to have faith both in life and in death.  
Whether you are called to die for your faith,  
or whether you are one who is taken in the clouds when Christ returns,  
you are called to draw near to God by faith.

**c. Noah Became an Heir of the Righteousness that Comes by Faith (v7)**

*<sup>7</sup> 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.*

By faith Noah also drew near, building the ark—  
and thus he became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.  
Could Noah see what was going to happen?  
No.  
Hebrews makes a point of saying that these events were "yet unseen."  
God warned that he would destroy humanity with a flood.  
And he called Noah to build an ark.  
Through this one building, God would save a remnant of humanity,  
but destroy the wicked in the waters of judgment.  
Noah had to make a decision:  
would he believe God?

Or would he believe his own eyes?

Notice how Hebrews puts it:  
"In reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household."  
God saved Noah's household through this building.  
It is not by accident that many of the early fathers spoke of the church  
as Christ's "ark."  
Peter, after all, speaks of the church as a spiritual house—  
the spiritual building through which God saves his people.  
And just as Noah built an ark for the saving of his household,  
so Jesus is building his church for the saving of his household.

But Hebrews point is not to draw our attention to the ark—



but to the faith that produced the ark.

Verse 6 tells us the point of this paragraph:

“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”

Do you want to please God?

Then *do not* focus on “trying harder!”  
You will never please God by trying harder,  
because you will never be good enough!

What pleases God?

Faith.

What gives God delight?

When you seek him!

When you draw near to him!

Remember 10:22 “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith”

The life that pleases God begins with believing that God exists—and not just that he exists,  
but also that he rewards those who seek him:

as Jesus put it, “seek and you shall find”

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”

and then the affairs of this life will be ordered properly.

Dearly beloved,

you must believe that God rewards those who seek him.

(And certainly no one ever seeks God without God first drawing him,  
but that only means that you can be all the more certain  
that God rewards those who seek him,  
because your seeking is prompted by his calling!)

### **Conclusion: Faith and the Heavenly City**

We will look more in detail next week at Abraham,

but the summary of verses 13-16 is crucial for understanding the whole of Heb 11.

(Read verses 13-16)

*<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

Seeking God—drawing near to him—seeing by faith that which is unseen—

all of this finds its focus in the heavenly city.

Do you see yourself as a stranger and exile on the earth?

Are you seeking a homeland?

Or is the United States your home?

Some long for the “good old days”!

–the fifties!

By that some mean the 1950s

others mean the 1850s (the Confederacy)

and still others mean the 1750s (Jonathan Edwards)

and still others the 1650s (the Puritans)

and still others the 1550s (Calvin’s Geneva).

Such people are looking the wrong direction.

It is not even right to look back to the original 50s,

longing for some sort of primitive apostolic purity.

A close read of 1 Corinthians should cure you of any illusions

that the apostolic church would be a fun place to live!

Looking to Jesus does not mean going back.

Looking to Jesus means looking forward.

We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor

because he endured the last days wrath of God,

so that he might enter the last days glory of the heavenly city.

He is our homeland and our inheritance.

This is the point of the church’s existence.

We worship week by week and fellowship day by day

in order to remind each other of that faith, hope and love

that is the root and foundation of the Christian life.

Almighty God, give us eyes to see Jesus, ears to hear what he is saying, and hearts that love you and love to walk in your ways. Grant us faith that we might behold your glory in the face of Jesus Christ, that we might look to him, the author and finisher of our faith. And may we endure faithfully until the end, steadfast and unmoved from the hope of the gospel, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.