

Faith

Hebrews 11:1-12

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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.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, our Heavenly Father, through the power of your Son the Lord Jesus Christ and through the ever-present help of the Holy Spirit, we ask that you would open this Word and our hearts to receiving it, to trusting in it, and growing by it. And we ask to be reminded of why we believe, that we might by the gift of faith continue enduring and faithful to the end. Help us, O Lord, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As we look at this passage, we will begin this chapter by looking primarily at faith as its primary theme, looking of course at the example given here. But we have covered many of these examples. But we want to look at them not necessarily in their particular detail, but why we have examples at all, and of its importance. We will begin by looking together at faith's complexities as we understand it in the context of this chapter. We ended last week—I don't know if you will remember—but Pastor Mayfield talked about how we are to understand the role of faith throughout the Scriptures. And there are two broad ways in which faith is understood—not only two ways, but two broad ways. And that is first as we look at its complexities, is faith as an instrument of salvation or faith as evidence of salvation.

So let's look first—how are we to understand faith's complexities in this chapter 11 when he says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It doesn't necessarily

yet give us that what he's talking about is faith as evidence. It's only as we go further in the chapter as he gives these examples—because he's saying God commended these who live by faith. He commended them, and he gave them and declared them as righteous. Here, he is talking about faith as evidence. But to be able to get there, we first have to understand faith as an instrument. The way we understand faith as an instrument, of course, is through the Pauline letters and epistles to the church—they reminded of one of the most famous declarations of what faith is in this regard as an instrument, when Paul writes in Ephesians 2:9, when he says—let me begin in verse 8. He says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
[Ephesians 2:8-10, ESV]

What Paul is describing is faith as an instrument of salvation. Simply said, it is trust in the work of another on our behalf. For when he says in chapter 2:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.
[Ephesians 2:4-7, ESV]

So it is not only God's grace, his loving kindness, that provided his Son as a sacrifice for us because of our sin. Christ in his full, perfect, righteousness in our place. He also gave the gift of faith. That is, we believe not because we found it reasonable to believe; it is because we see the work of Christ by the work of his Spirit as irresistible, as a foundation for why we are saved. We are saved not because of our obedience, our wisdom, or our understanding, and certainly not because of any inherent righteousness. That means we don't obey so well. And even in our best obedience, even in our best weeks, we never measure to God's standard of perfect holiness. Christ has done that for us. And our faith, our trust in him, is the instrument God uses to draw us who were once his enemies, now united to him. United to him. That is, united to Christ in his work for us on the cross and in his resurrection.

So faith in its first complexity is to be understood as an instrument. But it is never exclusive from faith as evidence. This is why James says, "Faith without works is dead." It's not that James is in disagreement with Paul and somehow falling on the side of faith only as evidence. He's simply saying that just because you trust and say that you trust in the work of Christ—that's fine and dandy. But if your life is not at least reflective of the work of his righteousness, the fruit of that salvation—which we'll get to in a minute—then that's just empty words. So here we see, as it is talked about in this passage, faith as evidence when he says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Meaning we have a hope. We have a confidence, a trust in what we hope for.

And then he says in verse 2, "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." And then he goes through the beginning of the list. What is he saying? Faith as evidence is still trust. But it begins to show itself in action. That action begins by making decisions based upon the promises and the hope and the conviction, the confidence that what God says is true. We base our decisions, our life, our worldview around what he says as truth. So therefore, we have faith and we believe, and we act accordingly.

Part of that action is simply seen in what we do—and I've mentioned it before—when we gather together for a meal, and we stop, and we thank the Lord for his provision. What are we saying? What

we're saying in that moment is, we, though we might have purchased that food, the money didn't come from us originally; it is God's gift. God says that he will provide for us all that we need. We do not need to be worried about what we eat or what we will wear. Why? Because the Lord knows what we need, and he provides it. So when we give thanks to the Lord at the beginning of a meal, or in Jewish practice at the end of the meal, we are saying, "Yes, I might have cooked this meal, but it is the Lord who brought the rain, who put the vegetables here. It is the Lord who has provided." And so that simple act of prayer.

Or when we stop and we consider whether a decision would be wise or not, and we stop and pray. And we surrender ourselves, that our lives are not our own. We belong to the Lord. And we ask the Lord for wisdom in his Spirit and his guidance, "Lord, what would you have me do?" What we are doing in that moment is we are trusting as evidence in action of what God has said. And what God has said is we belong to him. And so we see the catalog, the evidence of those who said, "We believe God's promise, and we will act accordingly." Even though to the surrounding world, we look like fools. Even though we cannot demonstrate what God says will happen will actually happen yet, we are going to believe. Let me repeat that. What these people are giving us is they're showing us and demonstrating in their lives that we cannot demonstrate with demonstrable certitude that the things that God has said will happen are going to happen. We believe it to be so, because of what he has said looks like foolishness to the world. And yet they persevered. They endured in their faith, their trust in what God says is true.

So here comes the final part of the complexity of faith demonstrated for us in the Scriptures. Faith is not only talked about as an instrument, it is not only talked about as evidence, as faith as evidence—it is also faith that is worthy of imitation. So here, what I want to do is I want to share with you one scholar in his book, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy*. J.W. Thompson writes these words:

A catalogue of heroes introduced as patterns of imitation is unthinkable in any Greek tradition. The reason for this is that to the formally educated person, "faith" was regarded as a state of mind characteristic of the uneducated, who believe something on hearsay without being able to give precise reasons for their belief. The willingness of Jews and Christians to suffer for the indemonstrable astonished pagan observers.

So the writing of this chapter is itself a protest to the watching world that faith isn't just an instrument; it isn't just faith working itself in evidence of something that God has done, trusting in it—he gives to us loads of people for whom we can say, "I can pattern my life of faith after theirs." It would have been unthinkable during the time in which this letter is written, and, if we are honest, even in our own day. Because faith is still set up improperly in popular as well as in scholarly literature. Faith is seen as the opposite of reason. But nothing could be further from the truth.

But we cannot escape the fact that the Scriptures—whether it be the synoptic gospels, whether it be John, whether it be Paul—we see James, again—they tell us to what? To practice and to follow in their pattern. Not because we have faith in them, but because we seek to live out our faith in the pattern that they did: trusting in the God of promise and grace and mercy. And because Christ has done what he has done, because God has said what he has said, promised what he has promised, he is worthy of my trust. And so therefore, faith without works is dead. Faith without its evidence, faith without showing itself in the reshaping of the way you and I speak to one another, the way you and I work, our ethics, the way you and I relate, the way we interact in the world—if faith in Christ is not changing the way we once were before we believed, then it is worthless. But that evidence doesn't give us any argument before God that we are the ones who are faithful. Because that faith is a gift. He is the one who first demonstrated that he is worthy of trust.

But be reminded, of course, that when we seek to imitate, we do so still in a context, much as then, that this would be seen as absurd. Why would we seek to walk as Abraham walked, or Enoch, or Abel, or Abraham? So this is what the writer of Hebrews sets out for us: faith as evidence through a life of

following in the same steps as our forefathers in the faith walked. Because their faith was a demonstration of their trust. Their lives were a demonstration of trust in who God is and what he has promised. And now on the other side of the cross and resurrection, we have this evidence of God's worth and his beauty and his glory—one who is worthy of our trust. But so that we can deal with, at the heart of the problem, still today of faith, let's look at faith's challenges.

Now, I use there plural, because I do not see reason, singular, as an enemy of faith or as opposite of faith. For the greatest challenge to faith is not reason. Because of this. If I say or if we say that we believe that God is who he says he is because we believe the Word of God to be infallible and inerrant and truth by which we shape our lives around it—we know it, we study it, we love it—because we do that doesn't mean that we lack reason. Rather, we're seeking to place our reason, the foundation of our thoughts, on its worthiness. The fact that someone else disagrees of whether this should be the basis for that or not doesn't mean I'm being any less reasonable than they are. It's that we disagree over whether it's worthy evidence. Now we can talk.

As the chapter begins, it says this. It says, of course, that, "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." That seems foolishness to much of the scientific world today. But that doesn't mean that we have to—those who believes—that the Lord has created all things out of nothing in the space of six days and all very good—somehow lack reason. Though that is what is lobbed all the time. I would suggest that it's an issue and a debate over what is worthy of our reason and our trust and our faith.

So what are the challenges to faith? A familiar writer to many of you, C.S. Lewis, I believe nails it perfectly. He says the following from his book *Mere Christianity*:

My reason is perfectly convinced by good evidence that anesthetics do not smother me and that properly trained surgeons do not start operating until I am unconscious. But that does not alter the fact that when they have me down on the table and clap their horrible mask over my face, a mere childish panic begins inside me. I start thinking I am going to choke, and I am afraid they will start cutting me up before I am properly under. In other words, I lose my faith in anesthetics.

It is not reason that is taking away my faith: on the contrary, my faith is based on reason. It is my imagination and emotions. The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other.

The greatest challenges to faith are emotions and imagination. Lewis goes further. He says:

A man knows, on perfectly good evidence, that a pretty girl of his acquaintance is a liar and cannot keep a secret and ought not to be trusted; but when he finds himself with her his mind loses its faith in that bit of knowledge and he starts thinking, "Perhaps she'll be different this time," and once more makes a fool of himself and tells her something he ought not to have told her. His senses and emotions have destroyed his faith in what he really knows to be true. [...]

There will come a moment when there is bad news, or he is in trouble, or is living among a lot of other people who do not believe it, and all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief. Or else there will come a moment when he wants a woman, or wants to tell a lie, or feels very pleased with himself, or sees a chance of making a little money in some way that is not perfectly fair: some moment, in fact, at which it would be very

convenient if Christianity were not true. And once again his wishes and desires will carry out a blitz.

And that is, the promise is not reason. The problem is that our emotions and our imagination in the midst of our circumstances cry out at us and say, "Surely this is not true, and it can't be." And it leads us astray. And I believe, with Lewis, that the issue is not the fact that there's something faulty with our reason. The issue is we allow our imagination of what could be to overtake us, and we begin to doubt, and we begin to drift very slowly away.

This would have most certainly been the case, and many in this list were tempted. Can you imagine the emotion and the imagination that Noah had to wrestle with all those years while he was building the ark? While he was being ridiculed? While he likely was being slandered? Can you imagine—and we know some of the emotion that Sarah felt when she laughed at the idea that she would be pregnant at her late age. Each of these have gone through life and the viscidities of motion and imagination. And our circumstances cry out to our reason and say, "Surely God did not say," right? And so we drift.

The question is: how are you doing with regard to your emotions and your imagination and God's promises? Do you even know what role your imagination and your emotions play with your faith? How well do you know yourself? This is a question I've asked myself during vacation. In our frenetic, chaotic, distracted age, many of us scarcely know what's going on in the interior of our hearts, and even the inner recesses of our minds. And we may not even be aware of the ways in which our emotions and our imagination, often ignited by circumstances out of our control, begin to play havoc with our reason and our faith. My question for you is, dear brothers and sisters: what is happening on your insides? For I do believe it is these things that begin to take us away from trust and faith in a God who is reasonable and worthy of our trust.

Where do we go with regard to not only faith's complexities and challenges, but what about its core? At its core, if we look at how the writer of Hebrews proclaims and defines it, the way he uses faith in regard to these people whose faith was an evidence of who their trust in God is—we cannot escape the fact that it has an unalterable note of hope and endurance to it. Each one. Each one endured in the midst of great suffering, great difficulty, to hold onto the faith that God has said these things, and I will walk in them. They endured. That is absolutely present.

Then the other aspect is the one of hope. So if we were to take at faith's core, what is it? It is an enduring, hopeful, reasonable trust in the character, action, and promises of God demonstrated most certainly through who Christ is for us. Again, faith is enduring, hopeful, reasonable trust in the character, action, and promises of God demonstrated in Christ. This is the reason. This is the ground. This is the core for why these folks who went before us in this hall of faith stand for us as examples. The reason why we took the summer to look at some of their lives. We see not only in their lives, but in ours, so many reasons and emotions and circumstances that seem to cry out at us that God is not real. And yet the faith which he talks about, the faith which we need to be reminded of—and let me say, the faith which must be fought for.

Because friends, if we do not fight for this faith which we have received as a gift, if it goes unused, unreflected upon, unargued for—now here, I'm not talking about the world outside. I'm talking about within ourselves. If we're not seeking to encourage one another to acts of faith, to perseverance and endurance and praying for each other, we will drift. Remember, that's how we started the whole Book of Hebrews. The problem is spiritual drifting. So we must fight, even it is for fifteen minutes a day, to stop and say, "Lord, how goes it with my soul? What is going on in my mind? What is going on in my emotions and my imagination? Am I being reminded by the Word of God that it is that which holds my imagination and my emotions and my reason in unity with who Christ is and what you have promised?" Fight for it..

So let me tell you how I'm doing. I look back at my first week being back from vacation, and the first week of school—whoa, I didn't do so well. I was sitting at the back of the room as Wayne was leading us in prayer and going, "If I were to grade myself, I mean, at best a C-. At best." The emails, the texts, the phone calls, the needs that we all have can crowd out the fight for a living faith. And how easy it is for us to forget it. And we go very quickly to simply trusting in ourselves, our ways, our habits, our intelligence, our zip code, our degrees, our goodness. And slowly but surely, we drift from trust in who Christ is and what he has done for us.

So what do we do? I found a story this week and was reminded. And it was written by a man named Eric Kandel. He's a professor at Columbia University. He's recently written a book called *The Disordered Mind*. And one of the people which he wrote about in this book is an artist that, I have to say, heretofore I had not heard of before, but now I've begun to look at his work. His name is Chuck Close. He is dyslexic, and as a child there were many things—now these are the words of Kandel, the author. He says:

Chuck Close is dyslexic, and as a child there were many things he felt he couldn't do. One thing he could do, however—and do well—was draw. He became particularly interested in drawing faces, which is intriguing because Close is also face-blind—that is, he can recognize a face as a face, but he cannot associate that face with a particular person.

Our ability to recognize faces resides in the right fusiform gyrus of the inferior medial temporal lobe of the brain. People with damage to the front of that region are face-blind, like Close. People with damage to the back of that region cannot see a face at all. Close is probably the only person in the history of Western art to paint portraits without being able to recognize individual people. Why, then, did he focus on being a portrait artist? Close says his art was an attempt to make sense of a world he didn't understand. For him, it's not so strange that he makes portraits. He was driven to make portraits because he was trying to understand the faces of people he knows and loves and commit them to memory. For him a face has to be flattened out. Once he flattens it, he can commit it to memory in a way that he cannot if he's looking at it head-on. If he looks at you and you move your head half an inch, it's a new head for him that he has never seen before. But if he takes a photograph of the face and flattens it out, he now can effect the translation from one flat medium to another.

And so what he does is he takes portraits not only of himself, but he's taken it of those he loves and cares about, and he makes it into a photograph, and he places over that a piece of Plexiglas that has a very elaborate grid on it. And he marks on that grid. And then he takes in very creative ways, he seeks to then paint that face in a photo realism that is truly beautiful to behold. And only then is he able to commit it to memory. To the world, as a child who is dyslexic and who had the inability to remember a face, the fact that he would become a portrait artist is absurd and foolish. And yet he fought for it. To be able to understand the world around him. But unless he took a photograph and laid it down, he wasn't able to commit it to memory.

Lewis says of faith, "Faith is the art of holding onto things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods." So as Chuck Close would forget a face that he had seen, so our changing moves often distort the ever-present, always-faithful, inerrant promises of God. So we, like Chuck Close, must fight despite the ridicule of the world or even of your own emotions and imagination—to fight for faith. And Lewis says we have to be continually reminded through meditation, prayers, and reading that we are those who believe in who Christ is and what he has done.

So why do we have this hall of faith? Why do we need these stories repeated to us as evidence of faith? It is because, unless we fight for it, unless we give ourselves to this Word where God's promises are laid out, where his grace is demonstrated, where his love in Christ calls us to himself, we will surely forget it, and we will turn again in depending on ourselves, on our circumstances, and away from God. And slowly but surely, we will drift from a faith founded in the reasonableness of who God is, and we will drift away from his truth. So the writer of Hebrews is calling us again: faith, faith. Look again. Study. Remember. Give yourself to who God is, because he is worthy of our trust. Let's pray together.

Father, we ask that by your Holy Spirit you will enable us to fight—to fight for faith in who you say you are, and in your promises. Like our spiritual forefathers and forewomen, we ask that you would enable us again by your Spirit to look to your Word, to be reminded that you are worthy of our trust, and that we need that regular reminder that our faith is not based in our own wisdom, but it is based on who you are and what you have done. We thank you for faith as an instrument, that you have called us trusting in the work of Christ for our salvation, but that you also call us to live it out, to commit your Word to memory, to be shaped by your promises that we may be able to live out in faithful endurance in the face of changing moods a trust in who you are. Help us, we pray, as we begin this new school year. And I pray for students in our midst as they begin their new school year. Father, I ask that as they learn new things, it would never replace your inerrant, infallible truth and who you are as a God and Savior and ever-present Help. May they grow in the rootedness of their faith. And may you enable us, all of us, to fight each day to be reminded that you are worthy, worthy of our faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.