

What Is Faith?
Hebrews 11:1-6
John Breon

A few weeks ago, as we were getting near the end of our series on the Twenty-third Psalm, I was thinking about what to do next. I started feeling drawn to Hebrews 11. It's sometimes called the faith chapter or the faith hall of fame because it gives so many examples of people who had faith and lived by faith. I thought about the stories of those people and wanted to explore them with you.

But more than just an interesting chapter in the Bible, this message of faith is vital for us, for our relationship with God, for our lives, for dealing with the pressures and challenges of the times we live in, for growing and moving forward as a church the way God wants us to.

Then it occurred to me to ask you all what questions you have about faith. I made a little two question survey and put it out on Facebook and email. Several of you have already responded with some very interesting questions. If you want to respond to that survey, just go to the church website, www.durantumc.org, scroll down to just under the line "New Sermon Series: 'Faith in Action'" and click on the surveymonkey link. You can respond to these questions: *One Question I Have About Faith* and *Something I've Always Wondered About Faith*. I'll do my best over the next few weeks to help answer the questions you have about faith.

So, let's get started on Faith in Action. Today we'll talk about *What Is Faith?* There were several questions asked in the survey about what faith is, what it includes, how we know we have it.

How often have you heard statements like these? "You've got to have faith." "My faith sees me through." "I don't know how people without faith can make it through a situation like this."

We hear a lot about faith, we talk a lot about faith, we sing a lot about faith. Jesus talks about faith a lot. Paul talks about faith. But do we know what faith is? Have we stopped to think about genuine, authentic faith? And not just think about it, but also experience it?

There are various ways to talk about faith. Some use faith in a way that really seems to mean optimism—believing that things are really pretty good and everything'll turn out all right. Sometimes we hear faith described as a "blind leap" or "a leap in the dark." Faith does have to do with what's unseen, but it involves obedient response to what God reveals. Biblical faith is not a leap into the dark but a step into the light (George Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*). The term "faith" can also be used to describe a particular religion like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. Sometimes in the New Testament "faith" refers to the content of Christian teaching, the body of belief we hold. We're urged to "to contend for *the faith* that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3). Usually, people use the word faith to refer to belief of some sort.

The writer of Hebrews has just quoted the Old Testament saying that the righteous will live by faith. He's encouraged the readers of this letter to maintain their faith, not to abandon it. Then he said, "We belong to those who have faith and are saved."

And that leads into the first verse of chapter 11: "What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see" (Hebrews 11:1 *New Living Translation*). The writer describes faith. This is the closest the New Testament comes to giving us a definition of faith. And it's not exactly a definition but more of a recommendation and celebration of the faith that receives life and salvation from God.

The statement in 11:1 doesn't tell us everything there is to know about faith. Just in chapter 10, we can see that faith involves believing, being enlightened, having confidence and endurance, and doing God's will together (see 10:32, 35, 36, 38). But the description in 11:1 does tell us something important about faith. Faith is the substance of things we hope for and it's the evidence of things we can't see. Faith looks to the future and makes it real for us now. Faith sees the invisible and demonstrates that it is real.

Faith and hope are related. If we hope for something, we don't have it. But faith assures us that we will have it. Faith looks at God and trusts him

for everything. Hope looks at the future and trusts God for it. Hope built on faith is assurance. We may hope for a better world, for God's new creation and a new bodily life in that new heaven and earth, but if we don't believe in the God who raised Jesus, our hope is just optimism (Tom Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*).

Faith sees the promises of God for the future. And faith is confident in God's faithfulness. Faith is a response to God that celebrates the reality of promised blessings and the real certainty of events that have been announced but are still unseen (William Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 47b: Hebrews 9-13*). What God has promised will happen and we can live now in light of that future fulfillment. This doesn't mean we pretend that present circumstances aren't real, but we trust that present circumstances aren't all there is. They're not the final word. God has something better in store.

Faith is not only certainty about what we hope for, it's also evidence of what we don't see. If we don't see something, how do we know it's real? Faith convinces us. Later in the chapter, the writer will say that the great Old Testament heroes died without receiving the promises, but they still had faith. They were looking forward to what God would do and what God would give. Moses is described as seeing the invisible by faith.

We have physical senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell—that allow us to perceive the world around us. Sometimes we hear about a "sixth sense"—being able to perceive something beyond the physical senses.

That illustrates faith. Faith is what allows us to perceive spiritual reality—past, present and future. It's like faith is our spiritual sense.

A couple of weeks ago, I heard Tim Smith give a program about astrophotography. Tim takes pictures of stars through a telescope. I'll show you some of his photos in a little bit. As he was giving some background and history of astronomy, he mentioned the Hubble space telescope. That's a huge telescope that's in orbit around the earth. Because it's outside the earth's atmosphere, it can see better and further than any telescope on earth. Years ago, the scientists who run Hubble pointed it toward a patch of "empty" sky and discovered 10,000 galaxies there. There was a lot of reality

there; we just didn't have the instruments to perceive it.

There's a spiritual world, a spiritual dimension, a lot of reality that we can't see or touch or weigh or measure. Faith is kind of like the telescope that enables us to perceive spiritual reality.

To hear with my heart
To see with my soul
To be guided by a hand I cannot hold
To trust in a way that I cannot see
That's what faith must be

(Michael Card, "That's What Faith Must Be," album: *Present Reality*)

Faith hears and sees and holds to and trusts in God whom we can't see and in God's realm that we can't see with our eyes. Faith isn't superstition. Superstition believes in what's not real. Faith believes in what's not seen. "Faith sees the invisible but it does not see the nonexistent" (Paul Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith* 107).

So the writer of Hebrews offers a confession of faith, a description of faith. It's certain of God's promises. It's convinced that the invisible God is real. Then the writer says it was faith that enabled the believers of ancient times to be commended by God. This is the introduction to the rest of the chapter where we read several examples of those believers from ancient times.

It says they were commended by God, approved by God. They received a good testimony—from God. Faith receives God's approval. Those OT believers bore witness to God, but God also bore witness to them. God affirmed their lives of faith (Guthrie). That reminds me of Job. Right before Job's troubles started, God testified about Job's righteousness and faithfulness. Then the challenge came. Was Job faithful just to get a blessing, just to be protected by God, or did he trust God and love God for who God is? It turned out that Job really did trust God just for who God is.

There's a scene from Jesus' ministry when he commends someone for their faith, brags about their faith. It was in Capernaum. A centurion, an

officer in the Roman army, had a servant he valued highly who was sick and about to die. The centurion asked some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come heal his servant. Jesus went with them toward the centurion's house. But before they got there, the centurion sent some servants to tell Jesus, "You don't have to come to my house. I don't deserve for you to come here. That's why I didn't come to you myself to ask for this. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. I know about power and authority and chain of command. I give orders and my men obey them. Jesus, you have power and authority. You give the word and it will be done."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10)

Wouldn't you love to have the kind of faith that amazes Jesus? The kind of faith that Jesus would commend you for? Dallas Willard gives this definition of faith: "To trust Christ is to believe that he was right" (*Renewing the Christian Mind* 156). We believe Jesus knew what he was talking about, knows what he's talking about. We believe he's the Lord who has power and authority to do what he says and we trust him to do it.

Hebrews goes on to say that it's by faith that we understand God to be Creator—that God made what is seen from what is not seen.

Notice, by faith *we understand*. Faith involves knowledge. Faith may go beyond knowledge, but in the Bible it doesn't work apart from knowledge. We believe things that we also know or can know (Willard 404). For centuries, Christian theologians have talked about "faith seeking understanding" and "we believe in order to understand." Faith and knowledge don't oppose each other; they support each other.

An example of what we understand by faith is that God is creator. The universe was formed at God's command. Remember Genesis 1: God said, "Let there be...and there was." The Bible often affirms and celebrates that creation happened through the word of God.

The universe didn't exist, then it did. It *was not* and then it *was*. There was a beginning of the physical universe. We call that the "big bang." We can detect a certain type of "background radiation" that seems to be a result of that beginning.

Either the physical universe was not produced by anything or it was produced by something that's not physical. It seems very unlikely that it was spontaneously produced from nothing (Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* 101). By faith we understand that the non-physical source of the universe is God.

I mentioned some weeks ago that our planet orbits a star that's ninety-three million miles away. The next nearest star is 4.25 light years away (about 5.8 trillion miles). When we say, "Lord God of the universe," that's a mouthful. Our brains can barely begin to comprehend those kinds of distances.

But we can see something of those distant objects. That's what Tim Smith does when he uses a telescope to see far away stars and galaxies. Just to help us appreciate this, let me show you a few of Tim's photos that he sent me.





The God who spoke all of those worlds into existence is the God who created you and me, who loves you and me, who cares for us. Do you think he can handle whatever you're struggling with?

This great creator God came to us in Jesus Christ, lived and taught and healed and died for us, then was raised to new, victorious and glorious life. This God is here now, available to us. God calls us to believe that he is, to believe in him, to trust him, to commit ourselves to him, to be loyal to him. To have faith in him and to put our faith into action. We'll see several example of that faith in the next few weeks.

But right now, do you have the faith the Bible talks about? Do you trust the Lord? Do you put your faith into action doing God's will? There's a long line of faithful people who show us how to do that and who show us that it's worth whatever it takes to do it. Will you believe God's word and trust God's grace to save you, to guide you through life, to empower you to live a new life with God now and forever?