



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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The Crisis of Belief Hebrews 11:1-19

We hear the word *crisis* a lot these days, don't we?

Crisis comes from a Greek word that has to do with making a judgment or decision. It's a *turning point*, when we have to choose one way or another, take one course or another. It's when things can go either way.

Well, amid all the crises in our nation and world today, I want to talk to you about an even more important crisis—what Henry Blackaby calls “the crisis of belief.”¹

What does he mean by that? He's talking about those points in our walk with God when He has made His will and promises clear to us, and we have to decide what we believe about God and whether we'll take Him at His word and move in the direction He's leading us. It's not a one-time experience; it happens again and again as God works in our lives and in our life together as His people.

For a couple of months now, we've been working our way through the themes of Henry Blackaby and Claude King's study *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. So far we've looked at the first four of what Blackaby calls *Seven Realities of Experiencing God*:

- *God is always at work around you.*
- *God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.*
- *God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.*
- *God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.*

The fifth reality describes what we're talking about this morning: *God's invitation to work with Him always leads us to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.*

What is faith?

In our text, Hebrews 11:1-19, *the writer defined genuine faith and illustrated it with the lives of ancient believers*. Listen to how he did this. *Read text . . .*

This text gives us the classic definition of faith with two parallel statements. **Now faith is confidence in we hope for²** or as the KJV/NKJV put it, **the substance of things hoped for**. In other words, faith is being as sure of what we hope for as if it were actually in our hands! It's having **assurance about what we do not see**. The parallelism makes essentially the same point. It's confidence in what we can't yet see.

Then the writer goes on to point to the ancients as examples of this kind of faith (11:4-19).

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.

By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death.

By faith Noah built the ark to save his family from the flood, **condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.**

By faith Abraham obeyed God when He called him to go to a place he would later inherit, even though he didn't know where it was that he was going. Like Isaac and Jacob after him, **he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country**, living in tents. But it wasn't for naught; **he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

It was by faith that Abraham and Sarah were able to have Isaac, even though Abraham was old and Sarah was barren and well past the child-bearing years.

All these people, the writer tells us, **were still living by faith when they died.** They were sure of what they hoped for, even though they didn't yet receive what was promised. They saw these things from a distance and welcomed them. Even though they didn't see what was promised up close, they were certain of it. They lived and died in faith, **admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth**, pilgrims looking and longing for that heavenly homeland. And **God is not ashamed to be called their God.** He won't disappoint them, because **he has prepared a city for them!**

It was by faith that Abraham was willing to offer his son Isaac to God as a sacrifice. Abraham really believed that if he obeyed God and went through with sacrificing Isaac, God could raise Isaac from the dead in order to keep His promise that He would fulfill His covenant through Isaac.

In the midst of this roll call, the writer focuses his point of emphasis in v. 6: **And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**

The writer goes on to tell us about many more people of faith, and for some of them, things didn't turn out so well humanly speaking. But these suffice for now.

The lives of these ancients illustrated well what the writer was saying—that *real faith is being sure and certain of God's promises*, even though we can't hold them in our hands or see them like we can a bank statement or a stock report or a plate of food or a key to our house or car. Faith is taking God at His word, no matter what things look like from our human perspective!

Do we believe God?

Now that's a very important truth for us to grasp, especially when it comes to participating with God in what He's doing. Why? Because as Blackaby puts it, *God's invitation to work with Him always leads us to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.* It brings us to the point that we have to decide whether we'll take God at His word that He will do what He says, especially when it's something we know we can't do on our own. We can learn four things about this crisis of belief from this text . . .

First, *an encounter with God requires faith.* If we're going to respond to God, the only way to do it is in faith. We *must* take Him at His word.

As we do, we may not understand *how* He has done or will do things, but we will understand *that* He has or will! Isn't that what the writer is talking about in v. 3 when he says that it's by faith that **we understand that the universe was formed at God's command?** We don't understand

everything about *how* it was formed, but we understand *that* God did it!

Hebrews is right! Without faith, it's impossible to please God! How can we come to Him if we don't believe He exists and rewards those who diligently seek Him?

Now sometimes my faith is small. I have to confess that it would be a stretch for me to do what Henry Blackaby led his church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan to do.³ He tells how the finance committee said to him one year, "Pastor, you have taught us to walk by faith in every area of the life of our church except in the budget." The committee proposed that the church should determine what God wanted to do through them that year and estimate what that would cost. Then they would divide the budget three ways—what they planned to do through tithes, what others had promised to do, and what they would have to depend on God to do.

The church prayed about it and decided that was how God wanted them to approach their budget. Blackaby says that by the way they had previously done things, their normal budget that year would have been about \$74,000. But using this process, they set that year's budget at \$164,000—well over doubled!

The congregation committed to pray daily that God would meet their needs. Anytime they received any unanticipated gifts, they credited the amount to God's column. At the end of the year, they had received \$172,000—\$8,000 more than they needed!

Their crisis of belief was whether they would operate on what they knew they could do, or on what they would trust God to do. It was an encounter with God that required faith.

The second thing we learn here about the crisis of belief is that *encounters with God are God-sized*.

The text is obvious! Enoch left this life without experiencing death; only God could do that! God directed Noah to build the ark, and preserved him and his family through a flood that destroyed the world; only God could do that! Only God could have given Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, and only God could be counted on to give him back if Abraham offered Isaac to Him!

When God calls us to become involved in something He's doing, in some way it will have God-sized dimensions to it. It will involve something we have to trust *Him* for, something we can't do on our own, something *He* will have to do *through* us! And as He works through us, the world will see *His* activity, and people will come to know *Him*.

Back in 2008, when I was serving a previous church, God laid on the hearts of our Outreach Committee a burden for the citizen-soldiers of the local National Guard unit. As we prayed about how to reach out to them, word came that they would deploy to Iraq in a few months. The committee decided to do a hot dog supper at the armory to show our care and concern. More than 60 people from our church showed up that night. One soldier told us, "When I heard y'all were gonna do a hot dog supper, I thought it'd be three little old ladies serving hot dogs. This is amazing!" The sergeants told us several times that these men were deeply touched. Friendships started that led to opportunities to share the gospel in deeper ways with some of these soldiers and their families. Our church hosted the deployment ceremony. After they returned from Iraq, many of them came and worshiped with us one Sunday morning and presented the church with their highest honor, the Minute Man statue. I preached that morning about how Jesus is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament promised, and got an email that week from a soldier from a Jewish background, expressing how much the sermon meant to him.

Friends, God did that! When He laid that on our Outreach Committee's hearts, that year's budget item for outreach was almost depleted. The committee decided to trust God to provide for it, and He did! In fact, we left two tables full of deserts for them for the weekend! And who

knows how, while in Iraq, the bandanas with Psalm 91 printed on them or the little cross or card with John 3:16 printed on it that they could carry in their pocket that we gave them—who knows how God used all that?

God calls us to God-sized encounters—things He does *through us* that *only He can do!*

Now here's a third thing—*what we do in response to God's revelation reveals what we believe about God.*

The ancients' responses showed they believed what God said. The most powerful example was when Abraham was willing to offer Isaac to God as a sacrifice. When we *really* believe God, we'll do what He calls us to do. It might be in fear and trepidation, asking God to help our unbelief; but if we really believe, we'll obey. Our works bear out our faith.

You've probably heard the story about the man rolling a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls on a tight-rope. People were amazed and applauded. He asked, "How many believe I can roll *a man* across the Falls?" Many said, "Yes!" But when he said, "Who will let me do it?" nobody would.

Is that how we are when God shows us what He wants to do in us and through us, when He wants to do God-sized things? "I believe you can, Lord, but . . ." Aren't we really saying either, "Lord, I'm not sure You can," or else, "Lord, I know You can, I just don't want You to!"?

One more thing about this crisis of belief: *True faith requires action.* The ancients acted on their faith. And like them, if we really believe God, we'll trust ourselves to Him, take Him at His word, and obey, whatever He calls us to do!

Paul talked about **faith working through love** (Galatians 5:6, NKJV), and James declared that he would show his faith by his actions (James 2:18). It's the same with us. If we really believe God, we'll act accordingly.

God's invitation to work with Him always leads us to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.

Understand that our believing God and acting on that belief won't always assure "success" as we usually think of it, with everything falling into place and going right according to our view. The last part of Hebrews 11 tells about others who were tortured, flogged, jailed, stoned, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated; but they were commended for *their faith!*

Nearly 20 years ago now, a teenager in western NC named Josie had been sick with a mysterious acute fatigue syndrome. She was on a feeding tube for some time, and had to have surgery to implant steel rods on either side of her spine because it had become so limp. Before that surgery, her pastor told her, "Josie, we've prayed for you over and over, and I don't know why God hasn't chosen to heal you." She replied, "When God is done teaching me everything He wants me to learn through this experience, and everything He wants to teach others around me, He will heal me."⁴

Brothers and sisters, that's what real faith is all about. And when *we* truly believe God, we will follow His will and do what He calls us to do—regardless.

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¹ In this sermon series, I am relying heavily on Blackaby's ideas as presented in Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

³ Blackaby and King, 134-135.

⁴ I heard Josie's pastor share her story as a prayer request in a meeting in September 2000.