

By Faith (2)

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[0 : 00] Please turn back this morning with me to Hebrews chapter 11, a very famous chapter. It's a brilliant chapter and it's brilliant writing.

You remember, you know, you remember what's happened, don't you? You remember why this is being written? It's been written because the believers are wilting.

They're struggling and they want to give up following Jesus and as Jewish Christians potentially revert back to the safety net of Jewish ritual religious living.

It seemed to be easier and they wouldn't be persecuted. Remember we saw earlier that the writer commends them for the way where under the first wave of persecution they'd supported one another.

They'd prayed for one another. They'd visited each other in jail. They were there for one another and as if this, there's been a second wave of persecution and it's really knocked them for six.

[0 : 58] And so they're thinking, well, this can't be the way it's meant to be. So they're tempted to give up their faith. The only analogy, it's not a spiritual analogy, it's just a practical analogy that might help us understand better.

It's just, you know, recently, particularly in the south of England, people who, you know, and you've seen it in the news, you know, cameras have followed couples as they've walked back to their houses which were decimated by flooding.

And you know, you see it and there's a water line halfway up the wallpaper in the living room and everything's been destroyed and there's been sewage and effluent and everything. It's just a disaster and they're broken by it.

And sometimes, you know, they can really rally together and they can start again and they can build up their resources and then wham! A couple of years later, it happens again.

And just the heart goes from them and they just feel like just giving up completely, moving away, trying somewhere else. You know what it's like, isn't it? You can really kind of rally around one difficulty and one tremendous time of opposition or hardship in your life.

[2 : 04] But when it keeps coming, you know, why Lord? Why does it keep coming? How can we possibly carry on? And so that is kind of the context into which this letter has been written.

They're looking back, potentially, and I don't want to minimise their struggles and their difficulties, but maybe it's they're looking back to the good old days. And they're thinking, oh, it was so much easier for these Old Testament heroes of the faith, but people we looked up to, I wish we could have their faith, I wish we could survive like them.

What's happened? Where is this Christ who came, this Redeemer, the Saviour? Why isn't it like that for us? And this is not the chapter we expected. You might think it's the chapter we expected and reading it, you might think it's exactly the kind of chapter that we expected, but you will be shocked by this chapter because it's not what they expected and it's probably not what we expected.

These Old Testament heroes, they're tremendous, aren't they? We're just going to dip very briefly into what it says here in a sense about faith because last week we looked at one of the few definitions of faith that is given in the Bible in chapters 1 and 2 and why faith is so important and why it's this great gift from God.

And now we have faith incarnated for the rest of the chapter, really, don't we? We have faith with legs and arms. We have faith as it reveals itself in people and in the lives of people, faith personified.

[3 : 31] And that helps us to link this characteristic of faith that's explained what it has been sure of, what we hope for, and certain of things we do not see and putting it into the lives of people, people who lived in the Old Testament and often referred to as the role call of faith.

But if what I want to do very briefly is look at some of the characters, we don't have time to look at the people themselves, it would take us ages. We're just going to look at one or two of the characteristics that seem to be getting pulled together in the summary chapter of the Old Testament because that's what it is.

It's a summary at least of the early section of the Old Testament. Ah, great. I was wondering why I couldn't see my notes. I thought, I know I'm getting blind, but I didn't think I was getting blind that quickly.

That's much better. Thank you, Callum. A true servant. Okay, these Old Testament heroes. Well, let's look at one or two of the characteristics that is pointed out in this chapter from these individuals.

The first that comes across is the faith that they had was characterised by the fact that they trusted God against all the odds. You know, there are great stories of the Old Testament.

[4 : 42] You've got Noah and you've got Abraham and you've got others who, you know, Noah who built this ark in dry land, in desert conditions. You've got Abraham who left everything and went, he didn't know, you know, the chapter doesn't know where he was going.

Physically, he ultimately knew where he was going, but he didn't know where he was going physically. And they trusted God against all the odds. It was tough for them. And it's one of the elements of faith, the characteristics of faith that comes across in this chapter.

That it's a trusting God that he's worth trusting in. He's worth leaving home for. He's worth believing in. He's worth obeying and following, trusting in him against the odds, going against the tide because not many people are trusting him and remember someone saying it's only dead fish that go with the flow.

We're not going with the flow. We're going against the tide with our living faith and trust in this God. And that is what comes across a risky and a radical way of living is the life of faith.

They trusted God against all the odds. They believed God. He was worth trusting. He was good God. He was a holy God. He was a loving and gracious and kind and redeeming and rescuing God so they could trust him.

[5 : 59] Second thing we notice in the characteristics, if you're kind of summing them all up and bringing them all together and packing them into one kind of exposition of what faith is, they had spiritual insight.

That comes across really, really clearly in this chapter. These were people, one of the characteristics of their faith was that it gave them spiritual insight into spiritual truth and into God, even though they can only see dimly remember that in the Old Testament, remember that, it's very important we'll come back to it.

They knew there was something better. Look, Abraham was someone who was looking forward to the city with foundations, who's architect and builder with God, an astonishing verse that he was looking forward to the great architect who was building something that he would one day see and know by faith.

They had spiritual insight. They knew there was something better, which is interesting because that's the theme of this whole book, Hebrews for the Christians. They knew that there was more than this life to life.

All these people, verse 13, were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They knew that they were looking for a heavenly country, verse 16.

[7 : 23] Therefore God was not afraid to be called their God. They needed God. They had this great spiritual insight and they knew that they needed God.

Verse 27, by faith Moses left Egypt, not fearing the kings, angry, persevered because he saw him who was invisible. You see that? It comes across again and again in this chapter that they had spiritual insight.

They could see God. That's why they obeyed him. That's why they trusted him. They could see that this life wasn't all that there was to live and they were looking forward, even looking forward to the New Testament.

Even though they didn't know it in that term, they didn't know the reality of the New Testament as we know it. They were looking forward to what God would do. The third thing about them, or the third thing that is characterised in this chapter is that they experienced the impossible.

That was part of this roll call of faith. It's part of this declaration of their lives, of what faith was, sure and certain of things that they couldn't see and they were commended for that.

[8 : 27] They understood who God was and they experienced, in their lives they experienced the impossible. That's what often maybe we think about this chapter and I'll say a little bit more about that in a minute, but you know that there are amazing stories, aren't they?

Abraham becomes a dad as an old man. Nothing left in him. The Red Sea is parted.

Remarkable miraculous terms. Jericho's walls, this great powerful city of the ancient world crumbles through trumpet sounding and people walking around it.

Then you've got the lists later on, it's as if the writer is trying to get through all these things and he runs out of time and energy and says, well, you talk about the people who were raised from the dead and they were sawing and all these different things and he gives a list of some of the amazing miracles that people who had faith experienced in the Old Testament.

The answers to prayer, that's the third characteristic, experienced impossible. The last characteristic, I'm sure there's many more but the last I'm picking up on this morning is that they persevered through real difficulty and trials and the chapter makes that absolutely clear.

[9 : 46] They were lonely, they were unpopular, they were opposed, they were persp... they were weak. But these Old Testament heroes of the faith in tough times believed and kept believing and kept trusting and kept keeping on.

Okay, there are four characteristics that are highlighted in this chapter, it's a list of great heroes but I want to ask a question and I want you to answer it in your own minds as we go through it.

I want to ask the question, where are the great heroes? Is that the point of this chapter? To highlight great heroes, where are the great heroes?

Where are they? Think about it. I question whether they are great heroes. I think the great hero of this chapter is God.

These individuals and it wouldn't have mattered who was chosen from the Old Testament. It wouldn't have mattered who was the person that was chosen.

[10 : 58] They were deeply flawed. That's the reality, isn't it? They were deeply flawed. There's a very important verse I think in verse 7, it's kind of in a sense, a core verse, verse 7, the second half of that verse, by faith it speaks about Noah.

He condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. That's a very important statement because it reminds us that these Old Testament heroes of the faith were believers on exactly the same basis that we are, sinners saved by faith.

Heroes who were looking forward to God's answer of Jesus on the cross and receiving and having his righteousness that comes through faith. It's a wonderful link towards the teaching of justification by faith alone.

These were deeply flawed individuals. They didn't have a righteousness of their own. They weren't heroes at that level. They trusted in the Savior that God would provide so that they had this better country and this hope and this future and this miraculous life.

They were just people. And the Bible is brutally honest about them. We talk about these great heroes of the Old Testament and we long to be like them and yet they were drunkards and they were liars and they were incestuous and they were sexually impure and they were twisters and murderers and prostitutes.

[12 : 32] They were weak and jealous and dysfunctional. And I'm not saying that, the Bible says that. The Bible records that. The Bible is brutally honest about their faults.

I feel very human level. I kind of feel sorry for everyone in the Bible whose lives are exposed and I thank God that my life isn't exposed in the same way.

Their lives are exposed to point us to their amazing reality of grace. They are not heroes of themselves. The point of this chapter is not to say, come on guys, keep it going.

Look at these great heroes of the faith and just chunter on. It's to challenge us to look to the God who kept them. It's not to try and imitate them ourselves but to look to the God who kept them and He's not a different God who will keep us.

It's hugely significant for us to recognize that. This isn't a God who changed them, who forgave them for the depth sometimes of their depravity and their sin, who did great things through them even in the Old Testament shadow lands.

[13 : 44] Let's remember that the Old Testament is shadow lands and we're going to come to that now. What's the point of the chapter then? Is it merely inspirational?

Is it encouraging us to think, well Lord can I have a faith like Noah? Can I be like him? Is it to pray to God to raise up people like that again because we look around us and there's nobody like that anymore or we think why will these things not happen again?

Hold on to your seats. That's not really the point of this chapter. It's not really the message of this book. What we find at the point of the chapter is given to us in the end of the argument in verse 39, these were all commended for their faith yet none of them received what had been promised.

Why? Because God had planned something better for us so that only together with us they would be perfect. It's the whole thing of the book isn't it?

That Christ is something better. These Jewish believers were almost at the end of the tell of the work at the edge of the cliff and they were wanting to go back, go back to the Old Testament and the kind of heroes that they thought about and the way it was done in the Old Testament and the writer, the Holy Spirit through him is saying so powerfully God has a better plan for us, better than these Old Testament heroes of the faith.

[15 : 09] Every one of us is in the kingdom of God. We have more than they ever had. One of us in our ordinary plain, unexciting, unnoticed lives that we think maybe no one takes note of we have far more than they ever had.

They didn't receive the promise. They were living in shadow lands. They didn't have Jesus Christ that we look back on, sometimes so casually.

What I want to do is just quickly make us all think about what we have because that's what the writer wants to do.

He's saying don't look back to these heroes of the faith and try and emulate them. He says, we are not in the same league as them. We are far beyond them.

We're in the premiership, they're in the voxel conference. That's the difference. We are high because we have Jesus Christ. We're not in the same league.

[16 : 12] Are they our heroes? Can I give you two verses to look at? Look them up with me. Two verses to challenge that, that these are your heroes. Matthew 11, where we look longingly back to these days and say, I wish God could work like that again.

Why doesn't he? What's wrong? Matthew 11 and verse 11. Jesus speaks about the great last Old Testament hero, prophet of the faith, John the Baptist.

And in chapter 11 at verse 11, he says, I tell you the truth, among those born of women, there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist. Has Jesus saying that? Then he says, yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

John the Baptist is the greatest Old Testament hero of the faith. And the least person in the kingdom of God, the most rummish he Christian, is infinitely greater than he.

And also in John chapter 14, look this up with me also. This is even more astonishing. It's so astonishing. I don't even know quite how to exeget it.

[17 : 22] John chapter 14 at verse 12. Or verse, it'll start from verse 11. Believe me when I say this, as Jesus speaking, that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe in the evidence of the miracles themselves.

I tell you the truth, speaking about the miracles. Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. Okay, pretty radical stuff.

He will do even greater things than these because I am going to the Father and what I will do whatever you ask in my name so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask anything in my name and I will do it.

You've never heard that spoken to the Old Testament prophets, heroes of the faith. They didn't have that promise. They didn't have the Son having won this remarkable victory on the cross and ascending to the Father to make us utterly and completely privileged.

How does God see us? How does the writer here see us in the New Testament? We go around our Christian lives moping and dragging our feet and say, Robish days.

[18 : 27] It's terrible to be a Christian today. So secular, so ungodly, so un-Christian. Robish days, we can't do anything. Why can't we do anything? Because our God is so small and because we believe that Abraham and Noah and Jephthah and Samson and David were greater and they were greater days.

They were not greater days. We, God had plans something better. If we understand our Old Testament, if we understand the economy of grace and the timing of God, we would recognize that the greatest thing that has ever happened in this universe is Christ coming.

Is God being coming in the flesh? The Word made flesh, John 1.1. We have, and the writer here sees it and he wants to encourage these people to see it, that they can't possibly go back on Jesus.

He says, we have astonishing privilege. Today in St. Columba's, as ordinary Scottish, English, Irish, whatever we are, Christians, we have an astonishing privilege because we have seen the Word made flesh.

God has walked among us on this earth. We have seen Him interacting. We have seen Jesus, God in Christ, eating and drinking, sleeping and crying with kids on His knee.

[19 : 55] Seeing us, what the Ten Commandments mean, performing miracles, washing feet, nailed to a tree. The Lord Lamb of God, derelict on the cross, dead, risen, ascended.

We've seen it all. And it means nothing. We've seen it all and it's trivial.

We get more excited by His Saturday night takeaway and the telling than by Jesus Christ, that we have seen God in the flesh, flesh ripped apart, that we might live.

We've seen His salvation, not in the shadow lands, not through a sacrificial lamb or goat pointing forward to something that was going to happen in the future, not through the temple and the curtain and the holy of holies and all the stuff we've looked at in Hebrews, none of that.

We've seen that, but we've seen much more. We've seen it in fleshed in Jesus. And we've been gifted John 14 to 16, the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 11] It's not just seen Jesus, but as believers we have Jesus inside us in the person of His Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. We are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, indwelt by God, Spirit, children of God.

We have eternal life in us, is in us, is with us, so that even though we die yet shall we live. It means that the grave can't contain us, just as it couldn't contain Jesus, gave Himself over to death and on the third day rose again because death couldn't hold Him.

We have that life principle in us as believers through the Holy Spirit. Death will not keep us. We will be raised from the dead and weave the Holy Spirit in us, not only for that, but so that our lives can be changed and transformed and we don't need to be grumpy and sinful and failed and fallen all the time because we have the life of God in us to change us.

What a miracle to do the impossible. You sit here today thinking you can't do the impossible. I wish I was like Noah. I wish I had Abraham's faith. We have infinitely greater privileges than any of the Old Testament believers because we have the Word made flesh in the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

They knew the Old Testament believers did not have that. There may have been times which they were given the Holy Spirit to empower them for work, but as a people they did not have the outpouring of the Spirit that we have from Pentecost.

[22 : 38] Don't make Pentecost just a kind of an ordinary event. It's a life-changing radical event where God comes in and doesn't leave us as orphans but comes and dwells among us.

It's a one-off giving of the Spirit to the church of which we are apart. Don't think you're a second-class Christian or a second-rate Christian.

Don't look for some kind of second filling of the Spirit or second blessing so that there's a rated degree of Christian. We have astonishing privilege.

They didn't have that in the Old Testament. So I'm asking you today, do you appreciate that? Do I appreciate that? I'm asking you, are you tempted to give up because you think you can't live the Christian life?

Are you tempted to go back to it might not be Old Testament, Judaism, I doubt for many here it will be, but whatever it was before you believed.

[23 : 38] Are you? Really? What is there there when you see and know the privilege you have? What is the point of this chapter?

It points us back to God. He is saying, for our encouragement today, I hope, absolutely for encouragement, what God has prepared for us, for his people, which comes across again and again in this language, he has provided something better for us.

We have something better. He's finding a hundred different ways to try and get across that we have something better. And in this instance, it uses the Old Testament because that's what the people knew and that's what they were longing for and looking back to.

He's saying, no, we have something far, far better. We have the fullness of this gift of faith that they only knew in the shadow lands and in prototypical form as it were, which was looking forward to the Christ who would come.

But the characteristics of it remain there in our heart. Or the characteristics rather of faith remain the same that are explained in this chapter. We have the power of God to enable us to trust in the same way as they did the same characteristics that we looked at at the beginning of the sermon, to trust in Christ against all the odds.

[25 : 00] That's what we're asked to do, to trust Him. Trust Him when we don't understand. Trust Him when it's beyond us. Trust Him when things look black. Trust Him because we believe, because we've seen what He's done in the cross that He's a good and a loving and a sovereign and a death-defeating redeeming God.

We trust in Him. There are more reason to trust in Him than these great Old Testament believers. We also have spiritual insight by faith. We can see things.

We see things. We see Jesus. We see the future. We see that life is not all just about this. Isn't that the most remarkable verse? I've always found it a most remarkable verse that Moses regarded as grace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

Is that not a remarkable verse? What did he say of Christ? What did he know of Christ? What does it mean? Did he have some insight into Christ? Or does it mean that for the sake of the Christ who would come that he at that point didn't know about?

We don't know, but isn't it remarkable that Christ is at the very core, even of this reality, spiritual insight? We're looking for and we can have and know spiritual insight through God and through His gifts.

[26 : 18] We can experience the impossible. We stop believing in the impossible. We come to church and it's the same every week. We live our lives and we pray and it's the same every week. One of the reasons we've come to prayer this week is to rekindle a sense of belief in this God whose kingdom will come, whose will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That it's not just unclear as it was made very beautifully explained yesterday in some of the addresses. That it's not that God might progress His kingdom, that His kingdom is assured and His people are here and His people have to be drawn into the kingdom and He will do the impossible.

And that rebirth, that healing, that change in your own heart and mind He will do and He encourages us to persevere in trials.

Why isn't it like that for us sometimes? Why does it sound so much better from the front? And the sound bites of the sermon than it does in our daily lives? Why is it sometimes, but I've tried that, I've prayed and God hasn't changed things and I don't seem to be able to root out the sin or change the sins in my heart.

Ask God to show you your heart, to confess your sins and to be changed because He gives us power and self-control.

[27 : 42] Can I give you an example, I don't know if this is a very good example, but it's one I was thinking of. And we often say you're overweight and you want to lose weight and you pray to God to give you the desire to lose weight, to not eat cakes because that's what you really like.

Greg's is your first cousin, you go there all the time for your cakes and you pray. But every time you pass Greg's, you see this big chocolate clear and you've got to go for it and you go for it and you eat it.

And every time you do so, you feel bad after it because you say, well, I don't want to do that, I want to lose weight, I don't want to eat all these sweet things and you pray to God and you say, well, why aren't you taking away the desire for this cake?

And I say to you that you're blaming God because you still want the cake. And the Spirit and the power of God will not necessarily say to us, I will take away the desire for cake, you might have that all of your life.

You might find it absolutely tempting every day to eat chocolate clear, but I will empower you to cross the road, to not eat cake, to be self disciplined, to put into practice saying no, I will empower you, I will not put you through something that you can't do.

[29 : 11] I'm not saying I will take away the desire for cake and it might be a beautiful woman instead or a beautiful man that's threatening your marriage. And you actually take away that desire, but he may say, look, the desire, the temptation, the test may be there with you all time, but I will empower you to resist, to overcome, to walk away and to be self controlled.

And in so doing, we will find very often our desires do change as we obey Christ. Very often we think Christ not changing our desires is Christ not answering, but very often it's because we still want the cake and we don't want Christ more.

His Holy Spirit gives us self control in order to say no. And that is the level sometimes of faith in our lives is to recognize that. But we pray for Christ to show us our heart and we pray to overcome unbelief.

Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief. Faith is His gift. It's knowing what we have that's so important and we have so much and He's given us so much in the Word made flesh and the Savior redeemed and redeeming us and all that we have about Jesus that is we will never learn it, we will always be learning and knowing and growing and developing and our understanding of Him.

And we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts. This chapter is not a chivvy on chapter to say, come on, look at these Old Testament heroes, be like them.

[30 : 54] It's saying, come on, you have far more than these Old Testament heroes as you trust in Jesus Christ and recognize that you have something far better.

And the aim is through God's Spirit, this people to say, why would we give up Christ? And so today the same is true.

Why would you give up Christ? What is there that could possibly be better than Jesus Christ? And can I ask you if you're not a Christian?

What will keep you from Christ? What is it that you have that is better than Christ? Why on earth will you stay away from Christ who has offered so much, who loves you so much, who gifts you this faith when you will ask Him?

And if it seems like you're asking and nothing's happening, trust Him that you believe and look at your heart to see whether you genuinely are looking to put your trust in Him or whether you want to hold on to the sins that keep you from Him.

[32 : 10] May He have the glory. Amen. Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer. Father God, we ask and pray that you would teach us from your word that we would know your truth, that we would understand the amazing grace that is ours and the faith of God that is our gift by grace you've been saved through faith and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

We thank you for that truth today and we ask that you would help us to be strong. We ask that you would help us to love our friends who don't know you, to share our faith with them.

We ask you Lord that you would be very close to our friends in the church, some who may be drifting from you, who have stopped coming along, who are seeing the pleasures of this world far greater than the treasures of Christ.

We pray for them in love and in grace that we would be loving and respectful and gentle and kind and encouraging them back and that we would have the heart for prayer.

Bless our 50 days of partners prayer, may it not fizzle into insignificance but may God be given the glory as we passionately in families and in couples and in individuals and in partners pray for one another and pray for the gospel and pray for God.

[33 : 40] So help us we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.