

Faith that Provides a Foundation

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[0 : 00] We're going to read God's word together now. I'm going to read from the passage that David is going to preach from in Hebrews. You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised. For yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay, but my righteous one shall live by faith. And if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserved their souls. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

[1 : 35] 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.

Amen. Amen. My name is David Court. I'm one of the ministers here, and as Chris intimated earlier, we're beginning a series in Hebrews chapter 11 this evening.

Perhaps one of the most well-known and well-loved chapters of the Bible, certainly I think the most familiar passage in the letter to the Hebrews. And it's a chapter that we're going to work through in our evening services over the next few months, God willing.

However, unlike the renowned Puritan preacher Thomas Manton, we will not be preaching 65 sermons on it.

You'll be glad to know. Indeed, over the years, the chapter has been given many titles. Manton sermons are compiled in a volume.

[2 : 42] It's entitled By Faith. Others include Faith Victorious, Heroes of the Faith, The Biography of Faith, God's Hall of Faith, and Faith for Life.

And you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work out that the great theme of the chapter is faith.

Faith, I think the central term faith appears, I think, around 24 times in these verses.

And I want just to mention by way of introduction just three things about Hebrews 11. First of all, it's unity. The chapter itself is, I think, carefully constructed as a discrete section.

It's bookended in verses 1 and 2, and then at the end in verses 39 and 40 by these two expressions, faith, and were commended. It's a well-defined unit of the letter comprising, I suppose, a list of examples drawn from the Old Testament of those who lived by faith in the living God.

It's a unity, and that's why often preachers, ministers will take this particular chapter and preach through it. Secondly, it's structure. It's more than just a series of examples drawn randomly from the pages of the Old Testament.

[4 : 03] There's a very definite pattern, progression through the chapter. The emphasis here is not merely on the faith of certain individuals, but also on the saving power of God made known in redemption history.

There's a chronological movement through the chapter. The men and women of faith that are mentioned all served this unfolding plan and purpose of God.

And then it's purpose, thirdly. If the chapter contains this picture gallery of Old Testament saints, then it's a picture that's set in a very definite frame.

The chapter is given to us in a particular context. And I think it's important for us to see why the author wrote about these men and women of faith and where that fits in the flow of the letter.

The letter to the Hebrews, as many of you will know, was written to a group of first-century Christians, most probably converts from Judaism, and they were being tempted to abandon their allegiance to Christ to drift back to their old way of life and their old religious practices.

[5 : 18] And much of the letter is given over to highlighting the absolute sufficiency and supremacy of Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king, as we were thinking about this morning.

And chapter 10 that Chris read for us, you'll notice concludes with a kind of warning and a challenge. The author reminds his hearers of what happened when they first came to faith in Jesus. Recall the former days after you were enlightened. You endured a hard struggle with sufferings, publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, sometimes partners with those so treated.

You had compassion on those in prison, accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

So, in those former days, the Hebrews had been zealous for the gospel. They'd been willing to suffer, put up with hardship. They'd put up with opposition and indeed public shame for the sake of Christ.

[6 : 22] And yet, with the passing of time, things had started to change. And these Christian believers had become tired, weary. They were being tempted to drift away from the gospel and indeed turn away from the living God.

They were beginning to subtly, perhaps, move their confidence elsewhere. And that enthusiasm and commitment that they had to Christ had started to wane.

And that is a very real danger, isn't it, for Christian believers in every age and generation, ourselves included. Like the Hebrews of old, we too can be tempted, can we not, to be ashamed of Christ and His gospel.

Maybe ashamed of Him in our families or in our places of work or education. To withdraw rather than engage.

To keep quiet rather than to speak up. To turn back even rather than press on. To blend in rather than stand out.

[7 : 37] In Hebrews, the writer often likens his readers to being like the children of Israel. Having left Egypt, as they made their way to the promised land, you will remember that they grumbled and they complained.

They failed to believe God's promise to them. And they didn't press on. Rather than move forward, they chose to look back to Egypt and to this world.

And so, Hebrews 11 really is a chapter that comes amid a strong, sustained, stirring call to perseverance and endurance. To keep on in the way of faith.

And that is the context here. Verse 35 and 36 of chapter 10. Do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward. You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what He has promised.

We're not to give up, but to press on. We're not to shrink back, but we're to move forward. We're not to let go, but we're to hold on. We're not to be ashamed, but we're to stand up.

[8 : 50] And that's what makes this chapter of the Bible so perennially relevant for God's people through the ages. Because whoever we are and whatever our situation may be, if we're Christian believers, we all need encouragement, stimulation to keep on going and to keep on living by faith.

Because, of course, faith is foundational to Christianity. You can't be a Christian without faith. It's fundamental to both being and living as a Christian.

In Reformed theology, three elements are often highlighted aspects of faith. Often they give them kind of fancy Latin titles, but I don't do very well at Latin.

So, knowledge, assent, and trust. And yet, in this chapter, the writer's not so much offering us a kind of definition of faith, as he is encouraging us to join with that great company of Old Testament saints who've gone before us, traveling in the way of faith.

And he's showing us here how faith works or operates or functions at a practical level. It's a chapter that reminds us of the need to go on living the life of faith, despite the problems and the difficulties, often presented by a culture or society that's hostile to Christianity.

[10 : 25] And I hope that as we work through this chapter in the coming weeks, that if we're believers, we will be encouraged, inspired even, to keep on in the way of faith.

And if we're not believers, we'll be challenged to put our faith in the God of the Bible, rather than simply live our lives looking to and trusting in ourselves.

What I want to do tonight is to look at the opening three verses of the chapter. Let me read them again. 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. Well, let me mention three things about this great foundation of faith from our text tonight.

We'll take each verse in turn. The first is this, in verse 1, Faith looks to the future that God has promised.

[11:38] Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Now, the ESV translation that we use here, I think the NIV is the same, translate this verse in such a way that kind of emphasizes what we might call the subjective experience of faith.

In this way of reading the text, the author highlights faith's inner sense of assurance and conviction, and that's a perfectly acceptable way of reading the text.

But there is another way of reading or understanding the verse, and it's preferred by some of the older translations, including the authorized version. And those of you of mature years who may be familiar with that will remember how that reads.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. And the emphasis there in that translation is not so much on the subjective, but if I can put it this way, the objective aspect of faith.

The writer uses a word here that designates a kind of objective reality. Faith is the substance. It's the guarantee, indeed the title deed of what we hope for.

[12:54] It's something solid. It's something substantial. It's not a mist that evaporates under the heat of life's trials and difficulties. It is the foundation beneath our feet when the ground starts to shake.

It's the title deed to the future that God Himself has promised us in Jesus Christ. And those things that are hoped for are not kind of wishful thinking, but rather something that is certain, but not yet fully realized in our present experience.

It's the hope. Paul speaks of that in Romans chapter 5, verse 5. He says that the hope of glory will not let us down because we've already tasted the love of God in our hearts through the Spirit.

Elsewhere in Hebrews, the writer, chapter 6, 19, tells us that this hope is set before us as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast substance.

He says that the faith is the evidence of things not seen. And indeed, that's a theme that runs throughout the chapter. And we find that contrast things, faith and unseen realities, in verse 3, in verse 7, in verse 13, in verse 27.

[14:14] The word evidence there is something like proof, more than just a feeling or certainty of conviction. Where God grants faith, and through the Holy Spirit, He brings a piece of the future into the present.

And faith turns that future hope into a present reality. Of course, we can't know or experience that future reality fully or completely, but we can know something of it in the present.

By faith, we take hold of the promise, and we experience the substance of what we will one day receive in full. Thomas Manton writes, a lively faith gives such a reality, certainty, and present being to things hoped for, and yet to come, as if they were already actually enjoyed.

So, faith is not something unreasonable or opposed to evidence. The writer's point in this opening verse is to highlight the fact that faith is holding something to be true, even though we have not yet seen it fully arrive.

The writer wants his readers to continue believing in something that has not yet been fulfilled. He wants them to go on believing in the promises of God, despite the fact that what has been promised has to date not yet been received in full.

[15:41] And that's a distinction between receiving a promise and receiving what was promised. And we see that distinction later on in the chapter, verses 13.

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.

Verse 39, And all of these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised. What was promised?

A great Savior in Jesus Christ. A glorious future. A city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. Later on in the letter, that promise is described in terms of a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

These men and women had a conviction and a belief in what God had promised to them. Let me try and illustrate.

[16:47] If a father says to his son, for example, that on Saturday afternoon he'll take him to a football match, then at that point the son has received a promise, but not yet received what was promised.

He doesn't receive what was promised until the Saturday afternoon. But nonetheless, the boy can rely on the promise the father has made and live in the light of it, looking forward to Saturday, anticipating what lies ahead, preparing himself, perhaps, for the big match.

And that's faith. It's not a leap in the dark. It's holding on to the promises given by our heavenly father. It is resting and believing in the promises that God has made to us, promises that are forever sure.

John Newton's great hymn, Amazing Grace, there's those famous lines, The Lord has promised good to me. His word my hope secures.

He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures. And the life of faith has always meant just that, to live trusting God to do what we cannot yet see in full.

[18:05] That's what happened to Noah. The people laughed at him, but he believed God's promise of a flood even in the desert. Abram was called by God to go a place, go a place he had not yet seen.

And so we walk by faith, not by sight. We listen to God's word, and we set our sights on the power and the promises of our God. And the hope of the Christian believer is nothing less than God Himself.

His kingdom, His power, His glory, and the consummation of all His promises that are yes and amen in Jesus Christ. We have received the promise, but we have not fully received what was promised.

Like the promise, however, of a human father that can be derailed by illness, unforeseen difficulties, poor planning.

That can never be true of our Heavenly Father. And the future He has promised us in Jesus Christ is one of glory and joy.

[19:11] It's a living hope in perishable, undefiled, and unfading. There is absolutely no possibility it will not be realized.

And so by faith, we are to hold on to the promises that God Himself has made and persevere. We're called to the same kind of life as those saints of old, to be a people looking forward in faith.

Because faith looks to the future that God has promised. And that brings me to the second thing here. Faith looks to the future that God has promised.

Secondly, you'll notice that faith is what God commends. For by it, the people of old received, the ancients received their commendation.

Faith is that which God commends. Faith pleases God. Faith pleased God in the past, and faith pleases God today.

[20:16] It's by faith that the saints of old receive commendation. The author of the Hebrews here is not really focusing, I think, on the nature of that commendation. His point really is this, is that it was their faith that was commended, not anything else about them.

Later in the chapter, in verse 6 of the chapter, he says, without faith, it is impossible to please God. And I suppose there is a danger in a chapter like Hebrews 11, which mentions so many of the Old Testament faithful saints, and kind of reducing everything, I suppose, to a kind of character study. We end up saying to people to try, you know, try to be a bit more like Noah, or Abraham, or Sarah, or Moses, or whoever. Here are these great men and women of God who did great works, mightily used of God.

You need to pull up your socks, be a bit more like them. And I think that would be a great mistake. Because even a cursory knowledge of the Old Testament reveals that these men and women were far from being perfect individuals.

They had their faults and frailties, just like us. They were all weak, sinful human beings. And it's interesting, the writer of Hebrews has absolutely no interest in their gifts and their skills and their abilities and their pedigree and their intellect.

[21 : 43] He's only interested in one thing, their faith. This is his point. The reason they were so greatly used to further God's purposes was that they trusted God.

They relied on God. They believed in God. We think of those things that our world loves to commend. Think of those things that this world considers praiseworthy.

What are they? They are things like status and position, beauty and celebrity, wealth and riches, academic intelligence, political power, physical strength.

These are the kinds of things that are lauded by the world. And it's these kinds of people that our world wants to put on a pedestal. They're the kind of folks that fill the pages of secular history books.

Human history is so often about, isn't it, about the great and the powerful. And yet God's assessment is so very different. It's those who walk humbly with Him that receive His approval.

[22 : 52] It's those who choose the path of a servant and a slave that merit His smile. It's those who travel the way of faith that are commended. And God's commendation comes to those who look away from themselves towards God.

They trust in Him rather than in themselves. They lean on Him. They believe in Him. They look to Him. J.C. Ryle was the Bishop of Liverpool in the late 19th century.

He wrote a famous book put together entitled Holiness. And it's a kind of series, I think, really, of sermons. But in one of the chapters, he writes this.

The true secret of doing great things for God is to have great faith. I believe we are all apt to err on this point. We think too much and talk too much about graces and gifts and attainments and do not sufficiently remember that faith is the root and mother of them all.

In walking with God, a man will go just as far as he believes and no further. His life will always be proportioned to his faith, his peace, his patience, his courage, his zeal, his works.

[24 : 18] All will be according to his faith. And friends, that's surely, is it not, a message of hope for us all this evening.

God is not looking for men and women of great intellect or ability. He's looking for men and women of faith. Faith is key. He's looking for those who out of a sense of their own desperate need ever cast themselves and rely on the living God.

Looking for those who'll give up on themselves, who've despaired of themselves, who've abandoned self-confidence and instead thrown themselves upon the mercy and grace of the living God.

I wonder if you've done that tonight. I wonder who or what you're really trusting in. The saints of old, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses.

Their faith was not in their own strength and wisdom, but in the God who spoke promises to them. And friends, God is speaking promises to us tonight.

[25 : 29] Indeed, the gospel of Jesus Christ is one great and wonderful promise. For God so loved the world, He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Let me ask you, what are you doing with that wonderful promise tonight? These Old Testament saints were commended not because they were perfect, not because they never wavered, not because they never stumbled or sinned, but because they trusted God's Word above their fears, above their circumstances, above the shouts of a world that called them fools.

Friends, we're called to do the same. We're called to trust God and His assessment of what is commendable. Look to Him in all things and in all circumstances, in both the sweet and the sour of life.

Be like those people of old who were commended for their faith. constantly turn to Him and trust Him in all things and for all things. For faith is what God commends.

Faith looks to the future that God has promised. Faith is what God commends. And thirdly here, as time disappears, faith understands that universe was created by God.

[27 : 06] 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. Verse 3, by faith we understand.

Faith in God brings with it a way of looking at and understanding the cosmos. We understand that this world, what's complexity and its beauty, did not spring from nothing, by chance. It is not self-existent. It was called into being by the Word of God. And that's a really important perspective.

Because when we believe this, we stand against the tide of a culture that often wants to worship the creature rather than the Creator. And the claim of the Bible is that all things were brought into being out of nothing by God.

And in Jesus Christ, we therefore not only have an anchor for our souls, but one that brings us a true understanding of our world.

[28 : 23] We live in a world that frequently is very suspicious of faith, certainly amongst many of my generation. Faith is to be found in doubt and skepticism.

Faith is deemed to be the preserve of fools, the gullible and the simple-minded. Their oft-repeated mantra is, we don't believe in God, we believe in science.

As if their science or perhaps better, scientism itself does not rest on numerous faith, some of the many questionable faith presuppositions.

Biblical faith understands that the world and the universe was created by God. God declared the universe into being, and faith understands that that is true. Creation is God's design.

It's an expression of His will. And so purpose and meaning and order and reason have actually been built into the world and the universe that God made.

[29 : 32] It's not all a kind of cosmic accident. It's only in the light of God's creative acts that the universe can make any sense at all.

If there is no God, it's all meaningless. I'm reminded of the word C.S. Lewis, he gave a paper to the Oxford Socratic Club back in the early 1960s.

I have no idea what the Oxford Socratic Club is or if it's even still in existence. But he gave a paper. I'm going to read, not read the whole of it, you'll be glad to know, but let me read some words that he has in that paper.

If he says, I swallow the scientific cosmology as a whole, then not only can I not fit in Christianity, I cannot even fit in science.

If minds are wholly dependent on brains, brains on biochemistry, and biochemistry in the long run on the meaningless flux of the atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees.

[30 : 43] And this to me is the final test, he says. And then he goes on, Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and other religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself.

And then the famous line, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

And yes, science is good, science is great, but without God's revelation it is ultimately meaningless. It has to be rooted and grounded in Christian faith, because it's faith that brings understanding.

Herman Bavinck, I'm allowed to, Corey's not allowed to quote Herman Bavinck, I am allowed to quote Herman Bavinck. He wrote a book on Christianity and science.

I think Corey may actually have been one of the translators of the book, so if you've got any questions on it, you can speak to him. And he closes that book with these words, Christian science, he says, that is science conducted on the basis of faith in God's Word.

[32 : 02] It's a science that investigates all things by the light of that revelation and therefore sees them as they truly are in their essence. In the eyes of the world this might be foolishness, but the folly of God is wiser than men, just as the weakness of God is stronger than men.

And that's why those atheists that try to be consistent, like Richard Dawkins, say that even to ask the question about purpose and meaning in human existence, existence is stupid and irrational. And it's an incredibly bleak, anti-human perspective, and we can see where that may take us as a culture, as a society. It's quite literally a dead end. Because it's faith that brings understanding, faith in the living God.

It helps me to see that life does have purpose and meaning and significance. And that may not be a cure for those feelings that we have in difficult times, but it provides the basis for not falling into utter despair.

Tim Keller writes, the Bible tells us that if you don't let your thinking lead you to Jesus Christ, it will end in despair. By faith we understand that the world and the universe itself are not eternal or self-sustaining, but are utterly dependent on God.

[33 : 26] The universe was created by the Word of God. The God who brought the cosmos into being, who sustains it in the present, will one day redeem it in the future.

That is what the Scriptures teach. We are God's creatures in God's world. And so it's only in looking to God that we can truly make any sense of our lives.

Because a believing response to the revelation of Scripture brings understanding. It brings illumination. The light bulb goes on.

And yes, the secular scientific method is limited. It cannot explain purpose or meaning on its own terms. And so the ultimate answers to the big questions of life lie not in the world, as it were, but in the Word.

That same Word that brought the cosmos, everything into being. That same Word speaks to us the great promises of the gospel. It promises us a new creation.

[34 : 30] Peter says in his second letter, in keeping with his promise, we are what? Looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. And it is as we by faith become men and women united to Jesus Christ that we become new creatures.

If anyone's in Christ, he is what? A new creation. The old is gone. The new has come. And so through faith in Jesus Christ we belong, not in this old world and old age rather that is decaying and dying, but in that new world, that new age that God himself is bringing into being.

Faith in many respects cannot really be understood in the abstract. It's always relational. It's faith in, it's faith on, it's faith towards.

The Puritans called it a leaning grace. Because there's a sense in which faith doesn't exist on its own. It's always attached itself to something or someone. And here in Hebrews 11, the great object of faith is God himself.

The God of the Bible, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, His character, His Word, His promises. Time is almost gone. R.T. Kendall was the minister in the late, I think, mid to late 70s, followed the famous Welsh preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones, at Westminster Chapel in London.

[35 : 59] And he recounts in one of his books the occasion he was planning to preach through this particular chapter, Hebrews 11. And he was driving Lloyd-Jones to some preaching engagement in the Cotswolds.

And he asked them for a good definition of faith. And they discussed the matter at some length as they drove there and as they drove back. After about four hours of driving, they seemed no closer to a definition.

But the next day, the phone rang. And before Kendall could even say hello, a voice on the other end said, Believing God.

That's your definition. Hebrews 11 is full of men and women who believed God. They believed in Him. They believed His Word.

They believed His promises. They staked their whole existence on those promises. They left homes. They built arks. They offered sacrifices. They fought enemies. They wandered this world as strangers and pilgrims because they believed God.

[37 : 05] Biblical faith is not some kind of blind optimism. It is believing God. Believing who He says He is and that He will do what He has promised to do.

It's believing His Word. Faith looks to the cross of Christ and says, here is the evidence of God's love and the substance of His promise to me, a sinner.

Faith looks at the empty tomb and says, here is the victory of God's power and the guarantee of my hope of eternal life. And yes, much in this present world is fading and dying.

But the Word of God endures forever. And the promises of God are unshakable. And Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

So let me encourage you this evening, if you're a believer, to look to Him in faith and to press on. It can be hard in the face of bereavement, illness, other difficulties.

[38 : 07] But the call is to stand as a child of the promise, to fix your eyes on Him, Jesus Christ, your soul's reward, to keep running the race, to keep walking by faith, not by sight.

And if you're not a Christian, well, let me encourage you to come to Him with all your doubts and fears and questions, to trust Him with all that you are and all that you have.

And so join that great company of men and women who down through the years lived by faith. Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank You that You are a God of grace and mercy and rich and abundant love. We thank You that You're a God who reveals Himself and has revealed Himself in Scripture, in the world that He has made, and in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, may You work in us by Your Holy Spirit. May You work in us that which is pleasing to You, that together we may be men and women of faith in You, the living and eternal God, as we pray these things in Jesus' name.

[39 : 38] Amen. Amen.