

By Faith (I)

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So what I want to do for a little while this morning is to focus on what faith is. Because that's a pretty important question really, isn't it, for us, if we're believers, if we're believers, we are people who say we have faith and a very specific kind of faith, a very distinctive faith, a very definite faith, and we'll go on to look at that as we go through this passage, or at least I'm going to broaden it beyond this passage a little bit today as we look at this theme of faith. But I'm sure that if we were to take a poll of everyone here, or not so much a poll, but ask you to define what you think faith is.

I hope it wouldn't be too varied. I hope it would be fairly similar at what we would say. But maybe if you went down a Princess Street and you asked people in the street to give a definition of faith, you might find it's very broad and very different. So it's important that when we come to look at the scripture, not just on this subject but on any subject, that we know what the Bible teaches, and we know what the Bible means, we know what Jesus Christ means when he talks about faith, because words aren't simply malleable to make them anything we mean. Sometimes that's easy, sometimes we like doing that because we're challenged by the meaning of words. But it's important, isn't it, that words have meaning and that they mean something tangible and important.

When you're in a car and you come up to a sign that says, stop, it's important that we know the meaning of that word and that we stop, otherwise we might get clouded into by a lorry that's kind of the other way. When someone says, I love you, it's important that these words have meaning, that they have depth, they have weight, that we know what they mean, that they're backed up by our actions. In the summer when you go down the Royal Mile and they say that there's a free tour, you want that tour to be free and you're not going to be very pleased when they ask you for money at the end of it, because it's deceptive and because it's not really a free tour after all.

And church has many different connotations for many different people in many different ways. But we need to find particularly in spiritual matters that are so important, what the Bible teaches and what the Bible defines and says faith is in this particular instant. And that is so important with faith because this is God's word, it's God's message, it's God speaking to us and one day we will stand before God. You might not think so now, might seem very far away, but one day we will stand before God and it will be a disaster if we haven't bothered to find out what he means by certain words or if we've ignored them or rejected them or just made up our own version of them because it maybe pleases us or it's easier. It's very important that we recognize what God says in verse 6 of this chapter that we read together in Hebrews. There's a very weighty and significant statement and without faith it is impossible to please God. And that's a very important statement. Without faith it's impossible to please God and it matters that we are pleasing

God or that we are under God's favour because we will stand before God and because God is our Creator, he is also our Redeemer and is the one to whom we are accountable. So it's important that we go back and look particularly in this chapter but maybe broaden it out a little bit more as well to see what God says. I'm going to do a four by four thing very quickly. Four things that I think in general thinking and discussion that faith is not and then four things which faith are, which faith is sorry, Biblically. I think faith is definitely not being gullible. Okay, we sometimes speak about doing something in good faith. You know, well I bought this car of someone you know and I gave them 500 pounds in good faith. I wasn't to know that when I turned the key, the doors fell off and you know I just did it in good faith and that's kind of being gullible, isn't it? We don't know the person and we've accepted something from him. We've done a deal or an interaction with him without knowing them and it can often be unrealistic. It might work out sometimes to take people in good faith and you may argue it's a nice thing to do but it's not biblical definition of faith, being gullible, just taking someone at their word at that level.

[5 : 15] But not as it's second, it's not also wishful thinking. A lot of people take faith and would describe it in that way. It's kind of a, that you have faith that something's going to happen in the future. I've got real faith this year that in Edinburgh there's going to be eight weeks of a blistering hot summer. I've got great faith that that's going to be the case or that I'm very, I'm not well and I've got great faith that I'm going to recover from illness. It's more like a hope.

There's nothing wrong with it but it's not faith, biblical faith, it's a kind of intangible hope. It's a longing that something might happen that we want to happen in our lives without necessarily any real evidence or anything to back it up. Wishful thinking. Not as it in the third place, not as it in the third place, just positive mental, a positive mental attitude. You know, faith in yourself. Just believe and you can be what you want to be. You can be anything you want.

You know, kind of self-help philosophical thinking that we just have this great, if we just keep telling ourselves we're fantastic, that we're brilliant, then we'll be great preachers, that we'll have full churches because we're great and significant and important and we believe that.

And it's almost a, we keep just telling ourselves that things are good and we have faith at that level, positive mental attitude. And I'm not saying a negative, a positive mental attitude is necessarily a bad thing. I'm just not equating it with faith and it can be unrealistic if we don't know ourselves and know our limitations and know our gifts or our lack of gifts in certain areas.

Not as it in the last place, not as it just a feeling. I suspect that when you go down to Princess Street and ask people what they think faith is, most people will say it's a feeling. Just, well, you know, I've got a subjective, even about spiritual things. They'll say, well, I just got a feeling that it's real. It's vague. I'm sure you speak to a lot of people and they say, oh, I've got faith. I've got faith. Maybe if you take it a little bit further and ask, well, what have you got faith in? You might discern it. You might, you know, unpack it a little bit.

[7 : 35] But very often people say they've got a general faith in something, something beyond themselves, something that they don't question that doesn't really impact their lives, is just there.

It's just a lump of faith that is there in their lives that doesn't really make any difference, more like a feeling. Now, these are some of the definitions and thinking about faith that maybe we come across and maybe we have to a greater or lesser degree ourselves. But that is not what the Bible talks about when it's talking about faith. Faith is not defined in many places in the Bible.

So there's not a clear definition given, but there is one here in this chapter in one or two places. Faith, we're told in verse one, is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. And without faith, it is impossible to please God. So there's this sense in which faith here, and as it's defined, biblical is in the first place, it's a solid trust in God, in the person of God.

That's what it's not a vague ethereal thing. It's not something undefined. It's something very clear. It's an absolutely clear, sure, uncertain hope for what we do not see, that hope being in the person of God as we go on to see in this chapter. It's a confidence in him. Right in the middle of really dark times in the book of Job, in the Old Testament, Job is able to say, I know that my redeemer lives and in the end he will stand upon the earth. This great unshakable, confident faith in the person of God that Satan tried to utterly and completely destroy in the person of Job. Or maybe the conviction that comes from Paul in Romans 8.30, I am convinced that neither life nor death, neither angels nor demons, past or present, powers, height or depth or anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of Christ, that is the love of God that is in

Christ Jesus our Lord. That firm conviction and confidence and that truth that we have sometimes sung in the Psalms in Psalm 62, he alone is my rock and my salvation, he is my fortress. So these are words of great personal conviction and of great relationship with God. And it's a strong and confident faith that is in direct opposition to the instability of life and of our experiences where so much is changing, so much is unpredictable. I mean even in the world in which you live, you click on the news feed of any website and you find just now all the instability, all the changes that are happening and the reality of people's lives being turned upside down, losing friends and loved ones, all kinds of things happening and yet throughout that all there is for believers the solid trust in God that changes everything for us. It should change the way you look, the way you think, the way you act, it transforms our surface experiences, whatever they may be, I'm not suggesting for a moment again that our surface experiences are all going to be smooth because we trust in God, but it's kind of like that picture of being diving deep, deep down in the ocean which I have never done and I hope never to do ever because it absolutely scares me even the thought of it, having anything like it.

[11 : 33] But people do it and they're diving deep down and you see it and maybe on screens on the television everything is amazingly calm and smooth where they are and yet it could be a force 10 storm on the surface that what lies underneath is absolutely calm and that you know that picture of that solid trust in God that our faith is not dependent on the condition of the waters on the surface which may indeed be battering and may be unstable and may be insecure and may be giving us difficulties, but our trust comes from this deep seated piece of knowing and believing and being in relationship with the living God. That really is that piece that passes understanding that the Bible speaks about for believers and if you've gone through troubled times you'll know that deep ocean experience, whatever the turmoil seems to be on the outside, so that's solid trust in God, being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. There's this great solidity and surety, you know so often in the Bible God is spoken of the rock, you know because it's a rock that doesn't move and it's absolutely unchanging, great to have that, but it's also this God, faith is this God whom we have come to know, faith it's not just a vague faith, it's a faith in the person of God, so it's a personal relationship. Verse 6 speaks about faith, it's impossible to please

God because anyone who comes to Him, we come to Him by faith and we believe that He exists and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. It's a language of personal seeking of relationship with this living God, it's an objective reality that we come to know this living God. He's not a figment of our imagination, we don't just believe in a God that we want to believe in, our own personal Jesus, we believe in this God who is revealed and not only do we believe the facts about Him, the concept and the reality of faith, biblically and the word study of faith leads us to a much more of an entrusting ourselves to that person. It's not just you know about God, it's not just you think about God or you even believe in God, it's that you've entrusted your life and you've entrusted your future and you've entrusted your heart and soul to Him as He's revealed, knowing

Him personally, hugely significant element of faith, trusting in the one who can be known. This is the God who reveals Himself to us through Jesus Christ, who we are separated from by sin, but who we can come to know through the saving work of Jesus Christ. This God who as verse 2 tells us is our Creator God. By faith we understand that the universe is formed at God's command so that what is not made is made, what is visible isn't that great? You know a lot of people spend lots of time arguing about creation and trying to argue people into an objective belief that God created the world. It's a that's good but it's an act of faith to believe that. We need to believe in God by faith as the Creator God. That's not saying that there's not evidence, it's not saying that we don't need to work through all the evidences of a Creator God but it takes faith to believe.

It's a God who is a redemptive God. If you go back to the previous chapter, chapter 10 and at verse 12 it speaks about this God who is Christ who has come and offered for all time one sacrifice for sin sitting at the right hand of God. It's a God who has come in the person of Jesus Christ. It's a God that we can look forward to giving us great things in the future. God has planned the, it's kind of in a sense it's the key, probably the key verse of the whole of Hebrews in terms of the theme that we've been looking at. God has planned something better. Christ is better, something better for us so that only together with us they would be made perfect and this is great hope of a future.

So we have this knowledge of God that our faith is in Jesus Christ who is revealed in the Word. And I know I've said, I've spoken a lot about this, I've said a lot about it in the last little while but if you just remind yourself of the importance of John chapter 1 in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning then through to verse 14, the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. So you've got this great symbiosis between the person of Jesus Christ and the Word of God. So this great link, this great reality that the Word that we read is not a history book, it is not simply a textbook but it is a living Word of God where Jesus Christ reveals Himself and it's a hand of faith that reaches out and grasps the knowable, living, loving God through His Word. You know that's why it's so important for us because the Word for us isn't something we just read ritualistically.

[17:12] It's not something that would just stick in front of us and take a little portion of now and again because we think somehow it ought to be good for us. It's a living Word by faith. By faith it's a living Word that equips us and guards us and keeps us and is sure and is certain so that our lies are not built on quicksand, quicksand. People don't think about quicksand anymore because people don't watch cowboy films anymore and cowboy films there was always a dreaded moment when the cowboy ended up falling off his horse and landing in quicksand. I had nightmares about quicksand because they would just slowly go down and all that would be left would be the hat and a bubble.

It was awful. I had terrors of the night thinking of quicksand. We'd ever have quicksand really here as far as I know not many places but if your life is built on anything other than Jesus it's built on quicksand. We're sinking and sinking fast and His Word is there so important to us. Now that will be until I die and I hope centuries beyond that if God so ordains the world to go on that this place will be a place where the poop it remains in the middle because the Word of God symbolically that is important because the Word of God is central. The Word that we sing, the truths that we sing from God's Word, the prayers that are educated and governed and led by God's Word will always be what is central. We will never be a funky place to worship. Okay? Don't come if that's what you're looking for. This will be a place where the Word, the living Word of God will be central and by faith that Word will transform your life and that remains absolutely crucial.

But remember even the real power isn't in the church, it isn't in the preaching, it's not even in the Word per se in the bare Word but it's through faith, it's grasping the Christ of the church and the Christ of the preaching and the Christ of the Word. That's where the power is. So don't come here and listen to nice neat good sermons or sing good songs. You come here to meet with the Christ of the songs and the Christ of the Word and the Christ in prayer by faith and through faith.

That is hugely significant for us so that we see and remind ourselves that faith is the solid trust in God, this trust of the one in whom we must come to know and I ask the question to do you know him? I'm not interested in whether you know about him but whether you know him, whether you love him, whether you've entrusted your life to him and whether you have this ongoing conversation with him through his Word and that you pray and that he speaks. So the third thing in faith and I'm moving beyond this passage, I'm just looking at these early verses which gives a definition but moving on to recognize that faith is also in the third place, it's part of the rescue package of God's wonderful salvation in Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 8 and 9 we have this great salvation redemption package which says for it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not from yourself, it's a gift of God not by works so that no one can boast.

So we've got this great gift, this great salvation package that God gives us that includes faith and includes grace for us. In other words, faith is not that if you want to define it, it's not that instinctive or intuitive or natural ability that we have to believe in something.

[21 : 09] Now I have faith for example that Daniel Sladek tonight will come here and preach on the fifth commandment the new Old Testament fast and the calls and he'll preach a good sermon and he'll be well prepared, I've got faith in that because I know him and I know that he's a good guy and I know that he prepares things well. But that's a perfectly natural thing, we can work in all of that kind of faith and someone that we know and someone come to him but the faith that is spoken about biblically is a gift, part of God's gift to us. It's that God given ability to rely on what Jesus Christ has, God has done for us through Jesus Christ. It's nothing we can do, nothing we can add.

So you can't come to God and say hey God I've got a really great faith, I'm sure that'll add to your salvation that you've done for me and together we can work out some way to heaven. It's not like that.

Even the gift of belief is from God because we're dead in our trespasses and sins without him. Dead people can't believe, that's why the imagery is so stark. It's not saying we're just not a little but unwell, it's not saying we need a little bit of fine tuning as we were dead and we need the gift of God and the gift of grace and the gift of faith and that gift to us is something that we can ask for. So that salvation comes through him. It's God's protection for us from unbelief, from satanic unbelief and from his fiery darts. The great protection chapter of the armor of God in Ephesians, the shield of faith which protects us. God gives that to us to keep us from unbelief. You will struggle because I will struggle because we all struggle with degrees of unbelief today and tomorrow in the next week. We'll be, we'll have launched into our hearts unbelief and unbelieving thoughts and unbelieving doubts and faith is what God gives us to protect us from that and it's what helps us to move from intellectual knowledge into trust in God. Intellectual knowledge can be a very dangerous thing especially intellectual biblical knowledge for all those of you who are studying in theological seminaries at the moment in and around Edinburgh. It can be a great thing of course but it must always move from the head to the heart and you must always be dependent on God's grace and God's faith to keep you humble in your knowledge and to move you from the open book to the bended knee. There must also and always be worship that accompanies our knowledge and so you know we we say the person who care father who came to Jesus do you believe he says I believe help my unbelief that just means help me because I don't believe as much as I ought to and I should and I hope you pray that it's a great this it's the in many ways one of the greatest prayers to pray because do we not always need more faith do we not always just believe in a tiny little way and made to grow our belief and he's Lord I believe help me and give me a greater belief and there's a in verse 6 you know about in faith it's impossible to please God anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he the words most earnestly seek him so we've got that great our movement towards God is that earnest seeking after faith and after his person and there's this passionate energetic moving towards him not just waiting back say well one of these days maybe God will drop some faith into my lap but rather this real and meaningful seeking of him which is why prayer is so important isn't it as a congregation we pray together for more faith to to be a beacon of light in the city to see the place full not for any self aggrandisement or any pang ourselves in the back because the city is so big and so full of so many people none of them hardly ever come to hear about

Jesus and are heading for a lost eternity and we long for more faith so we'll pray and so God we're serious about that too and we pray in our own lives because we need that gift from him increasing Lord I believe help me and believe thirdly and then lastly and very briefly we've seen faith is a solid trust in God it's a it's a God who by faith we have come to know personally and faith is part of that rescue package redemptive package that he offers us and it's also a transformational faith faith transforms us in other words that kind of militates against the idea that you know sometimes we'll speak to people and say oh yeah I've got faith but actually doesn't impact their lives in any way it's just it's an appendix there it's just there it doesn't seem to have any role or any purpose in their lives whereas biblically you'll find again and again that it's faith that transforms people's lives because it's the channel through which they are linked with God their Savior and maybe you take a letter like first and second Thessalonians to the church in first Thessalonians one verse three he says Paul says we continually remember before our God our Father your work produced by faith your labor prompted by love or in verse eight again he says the Lord's message rang out your faith in God has become known everywhere it's transforming this people it was well known it was the motivation for hard work and he goes on again in the second letter he writes to them in verse three he says we thank God for you because your faith is growing more and more and the love of one for of you for each other is increasing and both these passages he links faith and love that's interesting isn't it two are linked together but it's whatever it is it's transformational it's practical in other words and hopefully next Sunday morning we'll look at this chapter which is full of people from the Bible whose lives were transformed by faith whose lives were changed so it gives us our spiritual work ethic it gives us this transforming power it is something that as we ask for it and as we live it is reputable imagine that our faith being reputable being known being known of other people because being spoken about as it was in the church in Thessalonica and it's growing if we're stagnant if we're just coming in every week we're the same we're not really I'm not really understanding faith and grace because it's this gift that he promises that his arms are open to give us he's longing to give us it's not that he's unwilling and we have a need for it so there's this great continual progress and there's this dynamic that our Christian life is ought to be stale should they there should be a dynamism about it might not be that dramatic because we battle and struggle with lots of things but our faith nonetheless should be deepening you know sometimes it's like under the water it's quite peaceful and quiet but it's it's something that's growing and developing it's a developing adventure into the wonder of the character and the nature and the will of God for us and please remember that without faith it is impossible to please God and yet faith is his gift I mean let's bow our heads and pray briefly about that Father God we ask and pray that you would help us to be people of faith we thank you that we don't need to work it up in ourselves that we don't need to beat ourselves up when we don't have enough faith as if it's something that's a self-made recipe that we don't need to be concerned about that you simply ask us to be children who come to a

father for good gifts and ask for faith and ask for wisdom and ask for grace and ask for courage and strength and ask that we would be able to carry our own burdens because your burden is light because it's the burden of Christ and you also ask us to bear one another's burdens remind us of these things help us to live by faith may this be an amazing week of prayer when we physically expose ourselves to dependence on God by coming together and all the all the uncomfortableness of getting out of bed early and how inconvenient it might be for us to be here at seven o'clock in the morning or seven at night may it be a mark of belonging of being a sense of ownership of the work here and also recognizing that this is God's church and this is God's work and it's God's kingdom of which we play a very small but blessed part so help us

[30 : 35] God we pray in these things and bless us as we sing together our parting song for Jesus' sake amen