

What Faith Is

by Ray C. Stedman

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is one of the best known of the great chapters of the Bible. It has been called *The Westminster Abbey of Scripture* because the heroes of faith are enshrined here. Perhaps that is a misnomer, for I have been in Westminster Abbey and it gave me the sense of being in a tomb. There are a lot of dead people there, but there are no dead people in this chapter. These are all living saints, triumphant men and women who have lived life and gone on into a new relationship. I prefer, then, to call this *The Parade of the Heroes of Faith*.

In Hebrews there is an element which is regarded as absolutely essential to the development of the Christian life, and that is the quality of faith. It is what makes the Christian different from the non-Christian. That rather eccentric philosopher and nature lover of New England in the last century, Henry David Thoreau, once said, "If I seem to walk out of step with others, it is because I am listening to another drum beat." That is an exact description of faith: Christians walk as though listening to another drum beat.

This chapter centers on, and focuses upon, what faith is. There is need for clarity on this. I find this word, faith, is greatly misunderstood and there are many peculiar ideas of what it is. It might help to show, first of all, what faith is not:

- Faith, for instance, is not positive thinking; that is something quite different.
- Faith is not a hunch that is followed.
- Faith is not hoping for the best, hoping that everything will turn out all right.
- Faith is not a feeling of optimism.

Faith is none of these things, though all of them have been identified as faith.

Well, what is faith then? The first seven verses of this wonderful chapter answer that question, and the rest of the chapter tells us how it works. We will limit our thought to these first seven verses now. The author is not discussing faith in general, but faith in God. If this is important, then it is essential that we know what it is. In these seven verses:

- There is a definition in which we see the ingredients of faith. This, by the way, is the only definition of faith in the Bible.
- The definition is followed by a deduction, in which we have revealed the significance, the implications, of faith.
- Then there is a demonstration, in which we see illustrations of faith.

The first and second verses and the sixth verse, taken together, help define faith for us. Here we see **the ingredients of faith**:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. {Heb 11:1-2 RSV}

And without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. {Heb 11:6 RSV}

1. Note how those verses indicate that faith begins with hope.

Faith commences with “things hoped for,” that is, it starts with a sense of discontent. You can never have much faith unless you are dissatisfied with the way you are now, and are longing for something better. That is its first note. If you do not feel dissatisfied with the way you are, it will be impossible for you to exercise any faith. That is why, all through the Bible, the great enemy of faith is a complacent spirit, an attitude of self-satisfaction with the status quo. But if you are dissatisfied, if you are looking for something better, if you are not content to be merely a cultured animal living out a life of eating, sleeping, and amusing yourself, and eventually dying, then you are in a position to exercise faith. Someone has described that kind of life this way:

Into this world to eat and to sleep
And to know no reason why he was born
Save to consume the corn
Devour the cattle, flock and fish
And leave behind an empty dish.

Perhaps there are many who would like to have faith, but are never ready for it, because they are not dissatisfied. They must demand of life more than the mere mechanics of living. You want more, do you not? You are looking for something better. Then that is the first note of faith. Verse 6 puts it, “he who would draw near to God.” That is looking for more of life than is visible on the surface. Such a one is not satisfied to have life all surface, all length and breadth, but no depth. He wants to find something to deepen life, and that is the first note of faith.

2. Then comes “the conviction of things not seen” – not only a desire for something better, but an awareness of something else: That is faith.

It means we become aware that we are surrounded by an invisible spirit kingdom, that which is seen is not the whole explanation of life, that there are realities which cannot be seen, weighed, measured, analyzed, or touched, and yet which are as real and as vital as anything we can see. In fact they are more real because they are the explanation of the things which can be seen. We must understand there is a spiritual kingdom that exists.

This is so beautifully seen in the words and teachings of our Lord Jesus. He speaks of God the Father as though he were standing right there, invisible and yet present. He speaks of the world as a great family home in which there is a Father with a Father’s heart welcoming us. He does not see the universe as an impersonal machine, grinding and clanking along, as science so frequently does, but he sees it as an invisible, but very real, spiritual kingdom.

Again Verse 6 says the same: “He that comes to God must believe that he is, that God exists.” There are some who say, “That’s the hard part, that’s what is difficult.” No, it is not. The easiest thing in the world to do is to believe that God exists. It requires effort to disbelieve; it requires no effort to believe. The interesting thing is that everyone in the world, without exception, starts out believing God exists. It is only when they are carefully trained to disbelieve that any come to the place of declaring God does not exist. Light from God is streaming in on every side and all we need to do is open our eyes to see it and know that God is there. That is why children have no problem with this. The concept of God ought to be one of the most difficult ideas for children to grasp, since God cannot be seen. But the amazing thing is, children have no difficulty at all in believing that God exists.

It requires long and careful effort to train the mind to reject this evidence and explain it on other terms. This last week I skimmed through Julian Huxley’s book, *Religion Without Revelation* and was amazed again to see the tremendous effort he makes to explain away the evidence for the existence of God, and to find other explanations for it. It is only those minds, therefore, that have deliberately trained themselves that can claim to be atheistic. Even then, if they are not careful, they may suddenly refer to a belief in God, as the man who on one occasion exclaimed, “I’m an atheist, thank God!”

3. There is also a third ingredient of faith, “the assurance of things hoped for.” Faith is the assurance that the things hoped for, the things you are longing to have, the better man or woman you would like to be, will be achieved by acting on the revelation of the things unseen.

Let us put it all together now. It begins with a longing to be something better, and an awareness that within the universe there is something else, and that something or Someone else has revealed itself. As we act on that revelation we shall achieve the things hoped for, the something better. That is the story of the whole eleventh chapter of Hebrews, it is the story of faith. It will work for anyone at any level.

Here, by the way, is the answer to that persistent question we so frequently face, "What about the heathen who never hear the gospel?" They have the opportunity to exercise faith, for faith at its simplest level is, "he that comes to God must believe that God exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Any man who wants to be better, who believes that God exists and who will obey the revelation that he has, no matter at whatever level he finds it, expecting God to give him more as he goes along, will come to the place where he wins divine approval, the place of knowing Jesus Christ. Without that faith it is impossible to please God.

Verse 3 introduces us to a very amazing deduction which reveals something of **the significance of faith**, the implications of it:

By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear. {Heb 11:3 RSV}

That statement, remember, was made in the 1st century when the best scientific minds of the time felt that the ultimate breakdown of matter was fourfold: fire, water, soil and air. That was the explanation of all matter. Yet here in the 20th century, after two thousand years of human endeavor in exploring the secrets of the origin of matter, we cannot improve on this statement. This verse says that we can never explain the things which are seen till we come to grips with the things that are unseen. We must recognize the existence of things unseen.

I should like to place beside this verse a quotation I was given last week from the former president of the Stanford Research Institute. In a message on another subject he said,

Through the years I have struggled to gain a greater understanding of electricity and magnetism in order to help harness those forces for man's use. Even so, I cannot now give a lucid definition of electricity or magnetism, except to say that they are invisible forces which have real manifestations.

Is it not amazing that the man of faith arrived at exactly the same conclusion as the man of science, only two thousand years earlier? It has taken science that long to catch up!

That brings us to a very important deduction about faith – that faith puts us immediately in touch with reality. That is the genius of faith, that is the glory of it, the value of it. Faith is a way by which we may overleap the tortuous windings of reason, the need to grope by trial and error, and lay hold of the basic facts of life immediately. Faith is a way of piercing the illusion that tends to distract us and lead us into chasing rabbits of thought all over the pasture, and bring us right to the point, to show us things as they really are. Do not laugh at faith. Faith is dealing with facts. Faith grounds one immediately on reality.

- Science, for instance, cannot tell me how human history is going to end, but by faith I know.
- Science cannot tell me what is wrong with human life, what is the reason why I act the way I do, and you act the way you do (especially the latter), but by faith I know.
- Science cannot tell me what lies beyond the door of death. Even to the scientists it is an enigma, a mystery, but by faith I know what lies beyond.
- Science cannot explain the mysteries of my own makeup, and tell me how to fulfill my manhood, how to realize my dreams, but faith can. I have tried it and it works!

Someday, perhaps after painful centuries, when man's reason has slowly and tortuously worked out some of these answers and raveled it all out, mankind will find that it has been brought then to the very same place that faith could have many thousands of years before. This is why faith always

pleases God, because it comes to grips with reality and God is the Ultimate Realist. God is never impressed with the phony. He has no time or patience for the false; God deals only with truth. He says that to trust his word as a plain statement of truth, ignoring all the mocking taunts of those who think they know better, will not be an easy path but it will be an absolutely sure one. That is what Hebrews 11 says to us.

Now let us look at the three demonstrations the author gives here to illustrate faith. There are more than three in this chapter, of course, but these first three illustrate what faith is, the rest reveal how faith works. I want to spend a brief moment with these three men who lived by faith and who chose to believe God when the world around believed something else. The result was that each one found reality, each solved the main problem of his life, each realized his deepest desire and gained the gift of righteousness, i.e., the approval of God.

1. The first is Abel:

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. {Heb 11:4 RSV}

Here are the world's first brothers, Abel and Cain, sons of Adam and Eve. They lived when the world was young, when everything was much different than it is today. It was before the days of income tax, and smog, and clogged highways, and the terrible problems that we struggle with. Yet, despite the fact that they enjoyed what we call "the simple life," they longed for something better, they hungered after God. For no matter how good life is, it is never good enough if you do not have God. Man is never satisfied without him, and these boys hungered for God. Both had been told the way by which they could come to him, this is implied in the account.

But Cain chose to believe a lie, the lie that is still very evident today, that "one way is as good as another." He took the way that was easiest for him to work out and the result was, he was rejected, for, of course, it is always a lie

that one way is as good as another. That never works in anything – nature, life, or with God.

But Abel believed God and came the way God had outlined. When he believed God he discovered a great truth, the truth that man cannot have God's ability until he is prepared to recognize the poverty of his own. That is what a blood sacrifice teaches. There must be a life laid down before one can have the life of God, that is the point. You cannot have his ability for your problems until you are first ready to lay aside any dependence upon your own. That is the greatest truth that man can ever learn.

If we learn that here, as some of us are learning it, what a difference it makes in life!

Because Abel was the first man to learn that truth, the writer says he is still speaking to us – and we still need to listen!

2. Then there is Enoch. Enoch was the seventh man from Adam.

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. {Heb 11:5 RSV}

In the book of Genesis we are told that for 65 years this man lived like anyone else in his day, no different from the rest of his age. But at the age of 65, something happened. It was not that he got his Social Security, he found a deeper security than that. The record says he began to walk with God, i.e., he began for the first time to enjoy the continuous presence of an unseen Person, and he related his life daily to that unseen Person who was with him. When he did that he discovered a great reality, just as you will, if you try it. He found a fellowship that death could not interrupt. According to the record, he never died. He was one of two men in the Scriptures of whom it is recorded that they never died. He was "not found," that is all. God took him, the record says, without death.

I love the way the little Sunday School girl tells it: She said, "Enoch was a man who learned to walk with God, and they used to take long walks together. One day they walked so

far that God said, 'Look, Enoch, it's too far for you to go back; just come on home with me.' So he walked on home with God."

He became forever a picture of what death is to the Christian – only an incident, hardly worth mentioning. That is the reality that Enoch discovered by faith.

3. Then there is Noah. Noah believed God in a unique way.

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. {Heb 11:7 RSV}

Noah believed that God was in control of history. All the things these men believed, we are asked to believe today; there is no difference. Noah believed that God was in charge of history. He believed when God told him there was coming a great flood. When Noah told this around everyone began to laugh, and say how foolish he was. But Noah went right ahead and built a boat. Now that is not unusual in these days, but he built it five hundred miles from the nearest ocean, a thousand times too big for his own family, and when he got it finished he filled it with animals!

I am sure I know what they called Noah in those days: "Nutty Noah."

But he anticipated history and thus showed how short-sighted the world is when it walks in the light of its own reason, alone. He was led on by his faith to become, as this text says, "the heir of the righteousness which comes by faith," i.e., in Christ Jesus, and he became part of the divine family.

That is what faith is:

- Faith is believing there is another dimension to life other than those which can be touched, tasted, seen or felt. There is more to life than that. There is also the realm of the spirit, the invisible spiritual kingdom of God. All the ultimate answers of life lie in that kingdom.

- Faith believes that God, in his grace, has stepped over the boundary into human history and told us some great and very valuable facts.
- Faith believes them and adjusts its life to those facts and walks on that basis.

The world does not understand and oftentimes uses derogatory terms for those who walk by faith. Certainly they are not oddballs in every way, although in some way every Christian is, but, though the world does not understand why, the man who walks by faith wins the day because he has come in touch with things as they really are. That is the glory of faith.

Now, do you have faith?

Are you a man or woman, boy or girl of faith?

Is there a hunger for something better in your life?

Is there a conviction that God is ready to answer your cry? In fact, he has already answered it, in Christ.

Are you ready then to commit yourself to obey what he says, to accept his verdict, his viewpoint, as the true one despite the clamant cries that will pour into your ear from every side, saying this is wrong?

That is what faith is, and if you are that kind of a man or woman you can join this parade of faith in this unfinished chapter.

I read this last week an account of a dear Christian woman in Africa who died, and the village gathered to pay its respects at the funeral. There were many kind things said about her, but one of the most revealing was the comment, "If the Bible is going to be rewritten in heaven, this woman ought to be in it."

Now, the Bible is not going to be rewritten in heaven; it never needs to be rewritten for it is truth, and truth never needs to change. But one thing will happen to it. There are certain sections of it that will be extended because they are unfinished – the book of Acts, for instance, and the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. We are still following the same program. God is still calling men and women to live by faith. And if, by faith in what God has said, we conduct our life according to this revelation, we too shall someday have our names added to this parade of the heroes of faith, the men and women who

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have done the only great things the world has ever really known.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this glimpse into the life of the past and this revelation of what faith is today. How we feel the need of it in this hour, as we live in the midst of a confused and bewildered society, a world that is troubled, uncertain, unstable, in the grip of lies that it thinks are truths, and rejecting truths that it regards as lies. God

grant us the simple faith of a child by which we can trust thy love, trust thy word, and believe you have told us the truth. Teach us to live according to it, coming to know Jesus Christ our living Lord, by whom life can be changed and all that we hope for may be realized. Though it be through difficulties, through trials, through heartache and tears, yet we shall win the day, we shall arrive at the goal, we shall be what we long to be, in him. For his sake, Amen.

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