

**“Faith Is...”**

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).*

As Christians, “faith” is one of the most important words in our vocabulary. In fact, the Bible tells us that faith is essential for our eternal future because it is the way we receive God’s gifts of forgiveness and salvation (Romans 3:28), *but do we really know what it means?* Today’s reading from Hebrews challenges us with this question, and so as we begin today’s sermon, I want you to take a moment and, in your mind, and as honestly as you can, finish this statement: Faith is...

Did you think of words like “belief” or “trust”? Or when you heard “Faith is...” did your mind picture the people in your life who’ve illustrated or personified this important Biblical term.? Well, the fact is, we all have definitions and associations that accompany this foundational word, and there is a type of truth in the meaning that we personally bring to a word. We call that kind of meaning, subjective meaning; meaning that is determined by our own individual experiences and ideas. But, with the stakes so high, and with “faith” playing such a big part in our relationship to God and, ultimately, in our eternal future, we need to seriously consider the *objective* meaning of this word; by that I’m talking about the meaning that this word has on its own, completely outside of our personal perception or individual ideas. So, what does “faith” really mean?

Today, we’re in luck, because Hebrews 11:1 actually gives us a definition of this key theological word. There aren’t too many places in Scripture where we find such a straightforward, textbook-like explanation of a Biblical term, but that’s what we have here: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That’s what the ESV translation of Hebrews 11:1 says, but I’m not so sure that this definition communicates the objective truth that the writer of Hebrews was trying to convey.

Think again about your definition of faith. However you may have answered that question, I want you to take another step with me and consider this follow-up: Is faith something that comes from inside of us or is it something that comes from the outside? Is it something that we create from within? Or is it something that we receive from an external source? My concern with today’s text is that the language we hear in this translation of Hebrews 11:1 may take us down the wrong path. Now, don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that the ESV translation is bad, and I’m not challenging the clarity of God’s Word, but the words of Hebrews 11:1, as we have heard them today, tell us that faith is an “assurance” and this word begs further consideration.

Now, it may be because of the subjective meaning and sinful disposition that I bring to this text, but when I hear the words “assurance” or “conviction” my thoughts turn inward, and these words that are used so eloquently in Hebrews 11 seem to point to “faith” as something that depends on me; something that I generate; something that I do. And this inclination is natural to all of us. When we hear words like “assurance” or “conviction” we naturally equate them with a feeling or a decision that we initiate by our own will power or desire. While this may work well when studying for a test or training for an athletic event, when it comes to “faith,” this thing that is essential for receiving God’s gift of salvation, then we are in big trouble. You see, if faith, in any way, depends upon our emotions or will power or hard work, then we can honestly say that we’re lost, because the questions about this kind of faith are endless: Am I *really* sure? Do I believe enough? Is my self-generated faith strong enough? What about when I sin? Have I then fallen from faith? Have I lost my salvation? You see, a faith based on us, is a false faith; it is a fretting, fleeting, and feeble faith without a foundation and, ultimately, this subjective, law-driven “faith” leads us to lives consumed with worry and robbed of certainty.

Sometimes, in their attempt to comfort others, I hear people say, “You just have to have more faith.” This may be well-meaning advice, but it is also law, not gospel; it’s a demand, not a promise. And if we take these words to mean what they say, then telling some poor, broken soul that they have to have faith is nothing more than sending a person back inside of himself to find something that simply cannot come from within. And the Greek text of Hebrews 11:1 bears this out. You see, unlike the word we hear in our translation which seems to focus the reader on an action that comes from within, the Greek word here is a term which means: “that which has foundation” or “that which has actual existence.” It’s a word that points to a concrete, external thing; something that has substance, not as an emotion or idea, but something that exists as an actual thing. Here, the King James Version of the Bible states it best when it says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for...” Understanding the meaning of the original Greek word, you could say that faith is the concrete reality and foundation of the things for which we wait. That means that “faith” is not what we do, faith is not wishful thinking or determination...faith is the objective reality that shows us a vision of what our future holds.

Harold Buls writes that “faith gives a person the conviction that future, promised things are as real as if they had already happened. Faith causes a person to see things as they really are, though mere human senses cannot perceive them.” And about faith, another commentator says, “If I say, ‘I have faith in my car,’ that is not a statement about me or about the quality of my faith. It is a statement about the trustworthiness of my car.” And that’s what I want you to consider today. As you think about your definition of faith, think about it not as an emotion or conviction of the heart, instead focus on the object of that faith. Consider the substance and foundation upon which our picture of eternity is based, and when you do that, the only place you can look is to Christ.

In the very next chapter of Hebrews we are told to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (NIV) who is “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1). And this is right! In fact, this is the only place we can find assurance! You see, Faith has come to us in the objective reality of Jesus Christ. Faith is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who went to a real Cross in our place and endured the actual, objective pain and suffering that we deserved. And faith rests on the foundation of our Savior who objectively and physically rose from the dead and guaranteed, in that act, that we too will experience a resurrection of our own. Faith is given meaning in the objective truth of God’s Word and, just as “the Word of Lord” came to Abram in Genesis 15 and turned his skeptical heart into a heart that believed God’s promises that his descendants would be as numerous as the “stars in the sky,” we too have been given, from completely outside of ourselves, the gift of faith, and by that external, objective faith, God has credited us with the righteousness of Christ.

This is the kind of faith that gives peace. This is the kind of faith that bestows the conviction of things unseen, even when the things we can see shake and crumble and fall. And this is the kind of faith that leads to lives of extraordinary action in and for the Kingdom of Christ. That is the very gift that God has given you. Faith came to you in the objective waters of your Baptism, and faith is nurtured each time you hear His forgiving Word in your ear, and faith is strengthened each time you receive Christ’s Body and Blood in Holy Communion; and even when you doubt, this divinely given faith continues to hold to the promises of God and it always looks forward. When the job is eliminated...faith looks forward. When the diagnosis is dire...faith looks forward. When the pain is unrelenting...faith looks forward. When the grief is suffocating...faith looks forward. When the present holds nothing but shame and sorrow, faith looks forward and, through God’s Word, faith points us to the promise that we have been given in Christ Jesus. Faith is the substance of the things for which we wait, it is the concrete foundation on which our future rests, and it is the work and promise of Him who is always faithful. This is what faith is...and today, it is yours in Christ. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, in the Name of Jesus. Amen.

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