

Faith

Hebrews 11:1–2 ESV

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation.

Introduction

The next three weeks will be the final three sermons I preach to you as your pastor.

In considering what I would preach in these final weeks I landed on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

In [1 Corinthians 13](#) Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 13:12–13 NKJV

¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

Faith, hope, and love abide.

These are the things that remain for us even as other things pass away.

[Hebrews 12](#) states that God will shake heaven and earth so that he might remove everything that can be shaken so that only his unshakeable kingdom will remain.

One day, all that will remain will be the Kingdom of Love.

Our faith will be replaced by sight and our hope will be fulfilled.

But love, love will be all in all, For God will be all in all, and God is love.

But until that day we live in faith and hope.

And by our faith and in our hope, we now participate in the love of God that will one day pervade all things.

This morning I preach on faith, the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

I have divided this morning's sermon into the following three parts:

1. Faith Trusts a Person
2. Faith Precedes Understanding
3. Faith is from God, through God, and to God

Faith Trusts a Person

As our Lesson of the Day makes clear, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

To have faith in something, to believe in something, means, by definition, that you hold something to be true that you yourself do not know.

In John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb when the resurrected Lord Jesus appeared to her and told her to go to his disciples and tell them that he is risen.

This scene is a clear example of the difference between knowledge and faith.

Mary *knows* that Jesus is risen, she has seen him with her own eyes and heard him with her own ears.

But the disciples **do not** *know* this.

For them it is to believe, to have faith in the testimony of Mary.

It is not until *that evening*, when Jesus came and stood among his disciples and showed himself to them, that they no longer need to believe in the testimony of Mary Magdalene.

They were then able to testify themselves what they have seen with their eyes: their faith had become sight.

Of course Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared to the other disciples.

He needed to believe, to have faith, when the other disciples witnessed *to him*.

But when they told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.” He doubted,

“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

But Thomas misunderstands faith and belief.

To see the marks of the nails and to place a hand into Jesus’ side is no longer an exercise of faith.

But even Thomas, the disciple who insisted on seeing, ends up confessing more than he saw when he makes his confession to the Risen Christ “My Lord and my God”.

What I want to highlight in this first part of my sermon is what these examples from John’s Gospel illustrate: *Faith trusts a person*.

When you exercise *faith*, you place your trust in *a person* who *knows* something that you don’t *know*, and *can’t know*, outside of their testimony.

When you *believe*, you believe the testimony of *a person*.

But something mysterious happens when you believe the testimony of another person.

You become joined to that person in a kind of communion.

When Mary told the disciples that Jesus was risen, she extended to the disciples an opportunity to join *in* her joyful knowing.

By believing, the disciples became able to see and enjoy something that they were unable to attain by themselves.

It was, as it were, that they were seeing with the eyes of Mary who saw directly.

It is for this reason that belief is never a merely cold intellectual exercise.

Because you believe *a person*, belief is always bound up with love.

I think a wonderful illustration of this point is found in C.S. Lewis' novel *Prince Caspian in The Chronicles of Narnia*.

When the Pevensie children are trying to find their way to Aslan's How, Lucy sees Aslan who is beckoning her to follow him in another direction.

But the others can't see Aslan and there is a trial of faith.

Will the siblings and Trumpkin the dwarf believe Lucy or not?

While Peter, Susan, and Trumpkin all try to explain why Lucy must be mistaken, Edmund believes her and says,

"When we discovered Narnia it was Lucy who discovered it first and none of us would believe her. I was the worst of the lot, I know. Yet she was right after all. Wouldn't it be fair to believe her this time? I vote for going up."

Whenever you believe, you are believing in a person.

And this act of faith, joins you to the person and allows you to truly experience what it is that they testify about.

Indeed this is exactly what the apostle John explains at the beginning of his first letter:

1 John 1:1–3 NKJV

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

To believe in the apostolic testimony is to share in what they declare — to have fellowship with them, and their fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ!

You believe in a person, and this believe joins you to them.

And, in a way, you come to know what they know in your belief.

Which leads to our second point:

Faith Precedes Understanding

When it comes to exercising faith *as a Christian* you must learn that you believe in order to understand.

Let me illustrate this by first asking a question of the children: how many of you know how to ride a bike?

But how does someone learn to ride a bike?

Do you learn to ride a bike by going to the library and checking out all the books on bikes?

Do you learn how to ride a bike after you've learned all about bikes?

Do you learn how to ride a bike after you've read a book on *how to ride a bike*?

Of course not! The only way to *know* how to ride a bike is to actually *do it*.

You have to exercise faith by getting on the bike and actually riding before you *know* what it's like to ride a bike!

This is only one example among many.

You come to know how good ice cream is by eating it.

You come to know the joy of parenthood when you hold your own child in your arms.

You come to know the love of another person by extending yourself toward them in love yourself.

All of these are resonances within the created order of how we come to know God.

You come to *truly know* God and the blessings of God only *through* faith.

[Hebrews 11:6](#) makes this most clear:

Hebrews 11:6 NKJV

⁶ But without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Indeed, St. Augustine speaks of this in his own writings.

Reflecting on [Isaiah 7](#) Augustine famously stated:

"Unless you believe, you will not understand."

The primary disposition of the person who would *know God* is that of receptive belief; that of faith.

It is for this reason that in [Matt 18](#) Jesus called a child to himself and placed the child in the midst of his disciples and instructed them:

Matthew 18:3–4 ESV

³ “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

At the heart of Jesus’ teaching is the child’s receptive trust and spontaneous generosity.

The child who is rightfully cared for by his mother naturally receives the caring gifts of his mother.

In his little book *Unless You Become Like This Child* the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar explains that “trust and sweet surrender” are the most natural things in the world for the nursing child.

Indeed, the infant child is so accustomed to the giving posture of his mother that he unquestioningly adopts the same posture.

By their nature, children trust and receive their mother’s loving care.

And because of this, children spontaneously give in return their “own little treasures” back to their mothers.

von Balthasar has here in mind the smile of the young child.

Such smiles are truly priceless treasures that the child offers freely to his mother, because, as a child, all he has known of the world is the free gift of his mother’s love.

As Christians we are to become like children because we are to believe that, deeper than the misery of sin and death, there is a deeper reality: the reality of God’s free gift of love.

It is when we exercise the faith of a child, that we can begin to understand the love of our Father.

But this faith is not shallow or ignorant of the pain and struggle of life in a fallen world.

Mark’s Gospel illustrates this so beautifully.

While Jesus was on the Mt. of Transfiguration a man brought his son with an unclean spirit to the disciples, but they were unable to cast the spirit out.

When they brought the boy to Jesus the unclean spirit convulsed the boy to the ground.

The father told Jesus that his son had been afflicted from childhood and implored him, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

Jesus answered him saying, “‘If I can!’ All things are possible for one who believes.”

And the father’s response beautifully reveals the struggle of faith when he cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

In response to this heartfelt cry Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit who convulsed the boy before it coming out of him and leaving the boy like a corpse.

But Jesus took the boy by the hand and lifted him from the ground.

The Scriptures call you to faith.

But you are hindered by sin, your belief is plagued by unbelief.

But you are called to take up the prayer of this father.

You are called to turn to Jesus and cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

And Jesus will help you.

Though *your* faith may lie like a corpse on the ground, Jesus will take you by the hand and lift you up!

And he will lift you up and bring you to himself!

And this leads us to our final point.

Faith is From God, Through God, and To God

One of the great mysteries of faith is how belief in God differs from believing in the testimony of another human person.

When you believe in the testimony of another person, *who* you are believing in and *what* you are believing are two distinct things.

If your friend tells you that your long lost brother has been found, you believe *in* your friend *that* your brother has been found.

But when it comes to belief in God, this distinction fades.

God is personal and God reveals himself to you as a person and calls you to believe.

But God's call for you to believe is ultimately a call to believe in Him.

There is no "what" behind the "who".

All the wonderful particular things we believe as Christians are downstream from the source, God Himself.

This is what the incarnation is all about.

In the incarnation, God comes to us.

Jesus tells us plainly that He and the Father are one, and that we are called to believe in Him, and that by believing in Him we believe in the one who sent Him.

For us, who were not witnesses to Christ's earthly ministry, the call to believe comes to us in the *person* of the Spirit who testifies to us of Christ.

The Spirit of Christ comes to us in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, calling us to believe in Jesus, the perfect icon of the Father.

At the very heart of the Christian faith is the belief that the Triune God calls us to participate in the very life of God through Christ.

The one who believes truly partakes of this divine life that he believes in, that calls out to him *to believe*.

In believing in Christ, you become a partaker in Christ by the Spirit.

By faith, Christ becomes present to you.

In Christ, God gives himself to you, by faith you believe that God has done so, and, in believing, you receive the gift of God; God Himself!

For now, brothers and sisters, this is all done by faith.

For now we see in a mirror dimly.

But one day our faith will become sight and we will know even as we are fully known.

Like Thomas, we will place our fingers in the holes of our Lord's hands and our hand in our Lord's side.

But for now we reach out our hands to his body and blood in the blessed sacrament.

And in doing so we are blessed who believe in him even without seeing, and in believing, we have overcome the world.