

The Consistency of Faith Hebrews 11:1-3

Some years ago, a loud boom rang out through this building. The security video footage revealed the guilty party. We're not sure whether the young buck had mustered up the courage to run through the right, front glass door, or if his unsuccessful efforts were due to him eating too many wild mushrooms. We'll never know exactly why, but we heard and saw his attempts with a pendulum swing of responses from all in the building that day, ranging from the initial shock veiled in mystery, to grateful relief at his failed breaking-and-entering attempt, to eventually a bit of laughter at the expense of a few puns and wise-cracks.

Accidentally walking through a screen or glass door is not something that only less intelligent creatures occasionally do. And so, we've not held a grudge against our wild animal friend for scaring us or unintentionally smearing the glass with his drool. Seeing the glass door would have saved him a headache, but my theory is that he was simply looking *through* the glass to get to his desired destination. To echo one young man who saw the video footage, it was *buck-wild* at South Woods that day. Our text this morning is intended to convey that how we see and what we're seeing have implications for this life and the next.

I. Seeing the unseen

¹ *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Today, the author wants to examine what it is we're looking through. What kind of eyes do we possess? Though the role of faith has been plainly expressed a couple of times thus far inside of Hebrews, chapter 10 is the chapter that starts to warm its recipients to faith's prominent place in the Christian life.¹ In fact, one could reasonably say that the whole of chapter 11 is a lengthy historical illustration of Habakkuk 2, which the author quotes at the end of chapter 10. "My righteous one shall live by faith." The faith of some were flailing, on the cusp of forfeiting an inheritance beyond imagination. And if that was so, the author desired that his readers take a journey back in time to see afresh what it meant to live by faith. That's what the series of pitstops through chapter 11 will yield down the backstretch of Hebrews.

The names of ancients in chapter 11 are well established in Jewish life and learning—it's their "who's who" of the past. And the purpose of it is not unclear. How did these recipient's ancestors endure inside of circumstances not all that unfamiliar with this original audience? Are you threatened by your Jewish brothers? Then take a peek at Abel. Are you being ridiculed and discounted by others? Then take note of Noah and his obedient construction project. How did Moses walk away from the riches and ease of Egypt? Something lived and breathed in his life that was a greater treasure to him than gold and prominence. How did Moses come to that conclusion? I'll not give us those answers now, but chapter 11 will unfold the lives of many with similar struggles to the Jewish converts.

Yet, to begin, the Spirit desires that the reader have a clear understanding of the nature of *faith*. Verse 1 is structured as a kind of definition of the word. If any clarity was needed for those tempted to jettison Christ and His gospel, then surely a lack of true faith struck at the heart of the

¹ Hebrews 4:2 & 6:12

matter. For that clarity, and since there are a myriad of ideas concerning faith swirling in our world, “What’s not a part of that definition?” might be a first good question. There’s no idea in the text that true faith is a free-ranging feeling divorced from the Bible.² Something my earthly father said about 15 years ago, just before he passed away were these very words, “I just have faith. I’ve seen the light, son. I’ve seen the light and I have faith.” He had faith in his faith. There was no empty hand of humility looking to hold fast to Christ the Priest and His blood work revealed in scripture. In fact, genuine faith can never be exerted apart from God’s Word and work, a Word and work that has His Son at their heart. “*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ,*” wrote Paul to the Roman believers.³

Another bogus expression of faith that has found traction in our day is that it is seen as a means of self-discovery and individuality. In that framework I can arrive at my own interpretation of what salvation means for me. I have faith that, in my truth, God receives me just like I am, with no need for the repentance and trust traditionally called for in the Christian understanding. The book of Hebrews devours such individualistic and relativistic thinking. Genuine faith is expressed in a particular way toward a particular Person, and it grafts all who express it into a particular community of people.

Verse 1 begins to lay it out more clearly for us. It’s not intended to be a comprehensive definition, since it says nothing about Christ. But the context places Him squarely within faith’s central contours. Faith is an *assurance* in what has been promised, a confidence in what lies ahead, or *things hoped for*. We came across this same word *assurance* in 3:14, “*For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end...*” How can we be assured of things yet to come, not yet materialized, and maintain that assurance until the end? We could answer that in a few ways. The grace of God revealing and convincing us of Himself, that’s how! Showing us the many promises which have come to pass as a foundation for believing that the rest of them will also come to pass, that’s how! Burrowing every divine promise down into the birth, life, and death of a Man like us, Jesus Christ, who was also God in the flesh, unlike us, and opening our eyes to see Him, that’s how!

Faith is the spiritual confidence that runs through the mind, the heart, and the will.⁴ It has a subjective aspect—it’s experiential. It is a matter of knowing Christ and His work, but not a mere knowledge them. It’s a matter of knowing and assenting to the truth revealed in Christ, but those alone are insufficient expressions of genuine faith. The full experience is knowing Christ and His work, agreeing to the truth of Christ and His work, and then clinging to Christ and His work in trust—whether that be His work 2,000 years ago, today, or thousands of years from now. Yes, faith is subjectively expressed but objectively established. The pillars upon which it stands are immovable. Faith is a response to the massive truths found between chapters 1 and 10 of Hebrews. The stabilizing force of faith is the truth that God has put forth His Son to be the object of it. It’s never fixed on itself as the end-all. We don’t focus on the glass when we walk in this building, but we constantly see through it into our desired destination.

² Alistair Begg, <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/what-is-faith/>

³ Romans 10:17

⁴ Some scholars have opted to translate the Greek word ὑπόστασις (hypostasis) as *substance*, which accords with Hebrews 1:3. I sided with Thomas Schreiner, however, due to the context of Hebrews 11 and similar semantic usages in Psalm 38:8 and Ezekiel 19:5 that *assurance* (or *confidence*) is better suited than *substance* or *reality*.

But what are these *things hoped for*? Just in Hebrews we have a stout representation of these *things*. We live in hope for a world to come—2:5; we live in hope for an eternal inheritance—9:15; a heavenly Jerusalem—12:22; and an unshakeable kingdom—12:28. Other biblical texts corroborate with Hebrews. Remember Job’s hope-filled declaration, “*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God...*” What our physical eyes have yet to see come to pass we see as if it has already come to pass. The hope we have, based on the promises God has made, have a firm foundation: “*God is faithful.*”⁵

Faith is also *the conviction of things not seen*. We look ahead in faith, but we also see present realities by faith which have secured those future hopes. Hebrews 1 tells us that when our eyes are fixed on Christ, we see the radiance of God’s glory. There’s no one like Him. Hebrews 2 tells us that in setting our sights on Jesus, we see a Savior perfected and crowned with glory through His suffering. Hebrews 3 tells us to gaze with spiritual eyes at our Lord Jesus, a faithful servant over God’s house. Hebrews 4 teaches us that we have a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses. How many times has this mercy filled our sanctified minds and brought us peace? Hebrews 5 tells us that Christ didn’t seize the throne of heaven with self-glorification but was appointed to that highest place. It’s an astounding humility meant to bleed over into our lives. We could easily make it to chapter 10 and fall short of mentioning the present realities unseen.

It does astound us into a state of lowly gratitude when we think that we have seen Jesus in truth. Faith truly is a gift from God, and not of our own making.⁶ It’s the difference between seeing what is spiritual or not. We might think of a scene at Shelby Farms. You and I decide to go bird watching. You arrive on the wood’s edge with all you need—mosquito repellent, long pants and boots to keep the snakes and poison ivy from doing damage, and binoculars. I arrive with most of those things, binoculars excepting. And what we discover and knew before we ever settled into the woods is that the magnifying glass is going to make all the difference in our experience. The binoculars serve to bring home to our eyes objects and details beyond our natural range. And I would be a bad bird-watching partner as I ask for your binoculars every 30 seconds to see what I couldn’t otherwise see. Faith enhances and enlightens divine truths and provides an inward, present *conviction* of their existence.

Maybe you’ve had someone, an unbeliever, or even a fellow Christian, ask you, “How can we be so sure...that Jesus rose from the dead, that God is working in the world today, that we will endure to the end, that all things are being woven together for good for those who love Him?” The answer is that you see through the lens of faith! We look ahead 10,000 years and rejoice in our heavenly home. That can and does help us to endure in faith and faithfulness. Likewise, these present spiritual realities in Hebrews and strewn throughout the Bible are meant for us in the here and now so that we might endure present trials and present temptations. To echo Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:7, “*we walk by faith and not by sight.*” To say it another way, we don’t just see by faith, but faith is a way of seeing eternal actualities in the present and a way of seeing what has yet to unfold as if they have unfolded already.

⁵ Hebrews 10:23b

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

Hear it again, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. And, if this way of seeing were not gift enough, verse 2 adds another layer of God's kindness. We see the unseen by faith, but there is gain in seeing this way.

II. The gain of seeing the unseen

² *For by it the men of old gained approval*. At many turns, these Jewish believers were being rejected and denounced by their fellow Jews. We learned last chapter that it was happening publicly. These weren't private rebukes or one-on-one moments of being shamed for their supposed repudiation of the Mosaic Law. They were being mistreated and blackballed openly, in calculated and demeaning ways.⁷ So, you can imagine how they would have processed verse 3. If they were standing fast, then they found solace in these words. If they were wavering, it was intended to help them shift the court of opinion regarding whose opinion mattered most.⁸

Even as one who has known Christ for over three decades, I care too much about what others think and believe. I'm not alone in that kind of human-oriented fear. The medicine for this fear is genuine faith. The ability to see the invisible realities of Christ's reign, Christ's atoning work finished for His people, the heavenly place prepared by Christ, and more are the work of a Spirit-indwelled mind. But the Spirit is also at work in convincing us that verse 3 was not just for men in Jewish lineages who had faith.

The phrase *gained approval* was typically used in other places to speak of a public witness to someone's character.⁹ Paul writes to Timothy of the widow who has a good *reputation* for good works, with *reputation* being from the same root word we find in the word *approval* in our text today.¹⁰ It's a word found in the legal system of the day. Perhaps the idea here is a divine courtroom, where God's testimony/commendation about our faith is being held up in honor. And that His testimony of total truthfulness carries with it absolute authority.¹¹ What the author desired for his readers to grasp is that God was countering the public humiliation they'd received with an open statement of His own approval of their faith in His Son. God was the star witness to their way of life, not the Jewish community.¹²

And for that faith, we'll see over the next several weeks men such as Noah and Abraham did indeed gain God's approval with the exercise of their faith. Sure, the author of Hebrews could highlight some less than stellar moments these men had before the LORD. The impropriety of Noah with his sons and his strong drink comes to mind from Genesis 9. Abraham's lying to a foreign king in Genesis 20 was the furthest thing from faith. And these new disciples of Jesus knew these dark details of their forebears, and God's grace surely stands out in those stories. They would need to lean into that grace in time, but the author is seeking to move the weak in the direction which God highly esteems and commends—genuine faith. And He'll go on to show them, through the specific witnesses selected in chapter 11, that persevering faith is possible. Sometimes we just need that angle to move towards being assured—is it even possible?

⁷ The life of the apostle Paul at the end of the book of Acts is a most convincing place where this happens.

⁸ Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Commentary*, 480.

⁹ Peter O'Brien, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 400.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 5:10

¹¹ Sigurd Grindheim, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 544.

¹² David DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews*, 386.

They'll see that in the face of social alienation, and even death, faith is possible when it sees what is unseen.¹³

Hear this today: If you are placing your repentant faith in Christ, God the Father is pleased. If you are trusting Him in some difficulty, some season that is challenging, some change that is stretching you to your limits, God commends such a walk of trust. Are you living in light of His final Word spoken through His Son, the Kingly rule of His Son, the Priestly, finished work of His Son on the cross? Then rest in His pleasure over your life. And it's His take on your life which matters more than every other opinion or appraisal.

III. An illustration of seeing the unseen

The evidence the author brings to bear for the possibility of these Jewish brothers and sisters persevering in the faith is more than enough.¹⁴ In verse 32 we read a confession by this pastor that time failed him in describing the faith of past saints. But before he gets there, he gets personal, *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God...* You see that subtle *we* of verse 3? Not again until the very last verse does the author loop the audience back into the discussion. What's happening here? The Spirit is reminding these first readers that expressing faith is not an oddity to them. They were presently believing that *the worlds were prepared by the word of God*. In fact, before they ever heard the truth of the gospel, they believed God created all things by His word.

We might be caught off balance when we consider the remainder of the chapter. Beginning in verse 4 we see faith behaviors in others, but here the Spirit reminds these first readers that the faith they've formerly displayed and the faith that they are currently displaying. They believe that *the worlds were prepared by the word of God*. In fact, as an expression of their fidelity the book of Genesis, they believed God created all things by His word before they ever heard the truth of the gospel. What's going on here?

Knowing many of you personally, I believe none of you would tell me with a straight face that a stork delivered you to your parents. You may bear some absurdities about other things, but not that. Yet, honestly, can you offer ironclad evidence to the contrary? Birth certificates can be fabricated. Testimonies can be lies. Multiple witnesses can collude. You were born, thus you were present, but no memory is that good so as to recall that day. But the vast majority of you haven't questioned your parents by taking a DNA test, or verified the details on said birth certificate, have you? No, you trust that piece of paper and those who loved and cared for you all those years that you were born at that hospital and have that Mr. and Mrs. as parents.

Our text goes a step further to this first-century audience, of whom many were tempted to *throw away their confidence*, to do an about-face towards the truth of Christ. They weren't there when God's voice filled the void and created the visible world by the invisible word of His power. There was and is no way to empirically verify that. However, with the spiritual eyes of faith they beheld with conviction that God performed the miracle of creating. Yes, the sweeping exhortation encompassing the whole of chapter 11 is that the faith of others in ages past is

¹³ Chris Bruno, Jared Compton, and Kevin McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, 150.

¹⁴ Bruno, 158.

intended to provoke them to the same. However, he also wants to point out that the promised realities in Christ warranted the same kind of faith as what they expressed towards God's acts in creation.

Both halves of verse 3 are essentially saying the same thing, with *the worlds* corresponding to *what is seen* and the *Word of God* corresponding to *things which are invisible*. If you ever start seeing words coming out of mouths, go see a doctor. We can't see words, but by them God spoke into being what we see every day. The message: Jewish brothers and sisters, if you didn't see God or hear God creating the world and you have faith that He did it, then why would you renege on your commitment to trust him now? In Christ, He has established mighty, invisible realities, and declared them to be at the center of all He has been doing since before creation.¹⁵ In Christ we have many great and precious promises which have yet come to fruition. So, if you rely on God's word for the genesis of the world, will you not rely on God's word when considering the goal of the world—to send and bless and provide for and crush in death and raise to life and crown with glory the promised Messiah, and to then work to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth?¹⁶

Conclusion

Seeing beyond the physical realm is a particular kind of behavior in the life of God's people. We must faithfully raise the binoculars of faith and see Christ's glory, His achievements, His teachings, and His promises of a hope and a future. We must keep training ourselves to look through the glass of faith to see those things hoped for, and to see those invisible realities that are ours by virtue of our adoption as sons and daughters. Indeed, we must war with our unbelief.¹⁷

Faith. It's not the source of our salvation. Christ is. But God requires it. His Spirit gives it. He is pleased by it. Does it wane into distrust and grow cold for various reasons? Yes. That's why we need the startling admonitions and warnings of previous chapters. They help us regain our bearings of belief. But just as we need to be struck by the displeasure of the living God for all who might turn away from Him in unbelief, we also have need a few examples of how genuine faith operates. Beginning with Abel next week, might God enable us to grow in the assurance of things hoped for and in the conviction of things unseen.

¹⁵ Ephesians 1:3–4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

¹⁶ Koester, 481, with Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁷ 1 Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”