



Hebrews 11:1-6 What is Faith?

Summary: God calls us to a life of faith that requires us to trust in Him, even when life is hard.

This morning we come to one of the most well-known chapters of the Bible. If you had to assemble something like a top-ten list of sections of Scripture, you would include passages like Matthew 5, 6, and 7 where you read the Sermon on the Mount, John 14-17 with Jesus in the Upper Room on the night before His crucifixion. 1 Corinthians 13 which talks about love. Romans 6 and Romans 8 exploring the impact of the gospel on our lives. And Hebrews 11, the so-called Hall of Faith recalling the faithful witness of saints through the ages.

We're off to a slow start down that hallway this morning, we'll only make it through six verses, and the lives of two men – Abel and Enoch, but we're also going to think about what faith means in our own lives and consider three things that make it really hard to have faith today. I hope it's encouraging stuff for your soul.

I want to start by making a quick, but important, observation, and that is, as we already mentioned, it's called 'the hall of *faith*'. Which means when we look back at the religious superheroes of the Old Testament, the kind of people whose stories are told in Sunday School, the ones they make into episodes of Veggie Tales, the most important thing about them was the fact that they had *faith* in God.

Don't miss that, church. The men and women with supersized reputations in Scripture are not the people who brought the best sacrifice to God or worked the best or the most miracles for God, they weren't the people who prayed the most hours each day, or memorized the most Scripture. They're commended for *trusting* in God, *living by faith* especially in light of difficult circumstances.

These men and women faced different challenges, they saw God do different things, and they experienced different outcomes - next week we'll read more of their stories and we'll see that some of them made it out of their circumstances, some of them triumphed... and some of them did not; some became martyrs, they died for their faith - but *regardless of who they were, where they were, or what they did*, it was their faith that mattered most. They [obtained a good testimony](#) by their [faith](#).

To make that point, the author takes us all the way back to the beginning of history and moves forward chronologically stopping at the names of various saints along the way to show, faith is what God has always really wanted from us. We'll look at many of their names next week, but this week we start with something more personal – we start with us. So we read:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. **2** For by it the elders obtained a *good* testimony.
3 By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

Chronologically, the entire discussion about faith starts with Creation. Today this is still one of the most effective sorting mechanisms for people. You can ask, where did everything we see and experience come from? Was the world made by God or by someone or something else, or by nothing?

Completely apart from the questions of *when* it happened, or *how* it happened, is the fundamental question, *why* did it happen? And there are various answers to the question.

Why are we here? Did God make us or not? Are you made in the image of God as Scripture teaches, or are you the pinnacle of billions of years of unguided, unintentional, evolutionary beta testing whose purpose is to do nothing meaningful but become a platform for transmitting genetic code to the next generation, die, and become fertilizer for the planet? Your answer to that one question will have a profound effect on your experience of life *and suffering*.

You see, in life's most difficult moments you need to know – is there a God above you, or is there nothing at all? Whichever you believe, by faith, is going to have an effect on how you view the moment, what to do about it, and what comes next.

If you believe there is no intelligence or power behind the world, or if you believe that power or intelligence is real, but far off, disinterested, and remote, you will feel that it's up to you to survive on your own with just your wits and whatever resources and people you can pull together to be on your side.

If, on the other hand, you believe the universe displays the handiwork of God, and that He made everything by His own design, with His own skill, out of nothing, then the door is at least open to the thought that this kind of a God could probably help you out of, or get you through, anything that comes your way. Think about that, because it's important.

This is the starting point for all faith – each side makes certain claims and points to certain reasons or evidence, but at the end of all the arguing you're left with people deciding to believe, by faith, that God either did or did not **create the world**. And therefore, you're either on your own in a cold, expansive, undirected, unfeeling universe, or there is a God who made everything you see, including what you see in the mirror. And if He did all of that, what does He want you to do while you're here and what might He be able to do for or with you?

For now, we're going to leave aside all the reasons why it is entirely rational and reasonable to believe that God made a well-designed, highly-orchestrated, absolutely amazing universe and everything in it, and just press on "**by faith**" but if you have questions or want to look into it further, just ask.

Instead, we're going to begin our walk down the halls of religious history by looking at two very important men and the role faith played for each of them early in human history, and then, as I mentioned, we'll get to three reasons why it's so hard for us to live by faith today.

Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.

Cain and Abel were brothers, sons of Adam and Eve. They both went to worship God one day, and both made a sacrifice. Abel was a shepherd and brought one of his first-born sheep. Cain was a farmer and brought some of his crops. God respected Abel's offering, but did not respect Cain's. That made Cain angry and he took it out on his brother by killing him.

We find all of this Genesis chapter four, on the first couple of pages in the Bible. It's the first human death mentioned in Scripture, and it's not due to old age, or disease, or tragic accident, it's fratricide – a man killing his own brother. Just one generation into life on earth and already we're dealing with murder, because the human heart and mind can go in terrible directions when they do not seek after God.

Now, we're never told exactly why God approved of Abel's offering and not Cain's. Some have suggested that Abel's was better because he offered something living vs Cain's lifeless crops, that Abel offered blood while Cain did not. But it's never explained that way clearly in Scripture.

Personally, I'm not convinced the issue was with *what* each of them brought, as much as it was *the attitude* with which they came. Notice we're told that Abel came to make an offering *by faith*. The difference was not necessarily what was in his hand, but what he meant by it. He wasn't going through the motions, he was truly seeking God. And God recognized that, He was pleased with Abel's attitude and approach, with his genuine act of worship. Which just makes what happened next so tragic.

Christian, Jesus-loving, Bible-believer, brother or sister, don't miss this: Abel died at Cain's hands *while living with his eyes on God*.

Friends, I don't know if you've seen this before, but it's a powerful apologetic for suffering. From the earliest days of human history, a man with his eyes on God, trying to do the right thing, is murdered in cold-blood by someone near to him.

If human beings are going to be allowed to choose what they do in life, that means sometimes they will choose things that hurt other people, and they'll do it for selfish reasons, on purpose. There's no way to prevent it without removing the possibility of real choice.

So God allows Cain to harm Abel, but notice, [he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.](#)

It was wrong for Cain to kill him. It was unjust for a good man, doing a good thing, to suffer and die. But, he was totally and completely vindicated in his death. He would enter eternal paradise in heaven with God and his legacy would be one admired and respected by every generation that lived since then. For [through it he being dead still speaks.](#)

And think about it this way: what did Abel want when he made that sacrifice?

To please God, to be in relationship with God. What did he get out of it? Exactly what he wanted on earth, forever in eternity. Meanwhile we get an example, that even when bad things happen to us, legitimately bad things, unjust things, things that should not have happened, we can still trust that God sees, He knows, and He will work everything out for our good and His glory.

But, living with your eyes on God doesn't always involve pain, suffering, and loss. Look at the next example we find:

[5 By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, "and was not found, because God had taken him"; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. 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.](#)

You read the account of God creating the world in Genesis one and two, the first chapters of the Bible. Chapter three tells of the first sin and the subsequent judgment of God. In Chapter four you meet Cain and Abel who we just mentioned, in Chapter five you meet Enoch.

Like Cain and Abel, you don't get much information about him, but you get this: during a time when people were already turning their backs on God, one man was turning toward Him living by faith, diligently seeking God, and pleasing Him, then one day, [he was not, for God took him. He did not see death.](#)

One Bible scholar had this to say:

In a wicked and corrupt generation Enoch walked with God and so when the end came... there was no shock or interruption. Death [was] merely... the last step that took him into the very presence of the God with whom he had always walked.¹

Notice the absolute serenity described here. This is the kind of end of life we could all hope for - you spend your life on this earth pursuing God and relationship with Him and then one

¹ Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, Rev. Ed., 135.

day by illness, injury, or rapture, you wake up in His presence and it's everything you've ever wanted all along.

Abel suffered an untimely death at the hands of his own angry brother, Enoch just walked with God until God walked him home. That sounds a little Hallmark, but it's true.

On a bit of a sidenote here: my wife's sister and her husband have a dog named Enoch and I've never really been clear on the strategy there – maybe they were hoping to go for a walk with the dog and be taken by God, or that God would walk the dog for them? Or maybe it was the hope that the dog would be easy to train and well behaved because he 'pleased God?' I've just never been clear.

But, one thing we can be clear about – [without faith it is impossible to please \[God\], for he who comes to \[Him\] must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.](#)

This is where we'll spend the rest of our time this morning, because there is so much here for us to learn about faith.

First, notice that [without faith it is impossible to please God](#). It's not merely *difficult* to do, it is *impossible*. You cannot avoid faith in this life, but many of us want to. We want certainty. We want control. We want something we can know and observe beyond all shadow of doubt, we don't want faith, we want tangible guarantees, we want predictable outcomes, we want contracts. But God says no and asks us to demonstrate faith instead.

Now, you may remember that one of things we've discussed during our study of Hebrews is that sometimes God lets us see other ways to do things, just to prove they don't work. Well, think about the times you read about in Scripture when God gave people absolute certainty, when He removed any need for faith and revealed His presence and power in mighty ways.

There have been times when God showed up profoundly in human history, times when He revealed His power and glory like during the plagues in Egypt, or with the people of Israel on Mt Sinai. Or, think of all the people who witnessed the miracles of Jesus, heard His teaching, observed His daily life, and yet, none of these things utterly convinced everyone present to follow God and serve Him only, for the rest of their lives.

The point is: you can ask God for more evidence and assurance all day long, and He may give you some sign or circumstance or some experience or impression, some miracle, but don't assume *that if He would just do this 'one thing'* then you would be utterly convinced and you'd give your life entirely to knowing and serving Him. It sounds like it might work, but history has shown time and time again, that it's just not true.

Ultimately, the only way to really please God is [by faith](#). And in order to do that, you [must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.](#)

Now, those two things are incredibly important, and they both go together: you must 1) [believe that He is](#) and 2) [diligently seek Him](#).

There are a lot of people who get the first half right, probably most of the people in this room and many people you talk to at work or school believe that there is a God, but where many fall short is [seeking Him](#).

That's nothing new. After the first sin, Adam tried to hide from God. He believed in God but did not want to [seek Him](#). Scripture says even the demons believe that God exists, how could they not? But they don't [seek Him](#).

Why are so many people today willing to admit that God exists, that there is a 'man upstairs,' or someone you can pray to, but not willing to [draw near to Him](#)? The answer is: because they don't know who He really is. They don't know that He cares. They don't know that He [rewards those who diligently seek Him](#).

Most people would rather be a little ignorant about God because they want God their way. Last week some of you went over to Chipotle for lunch because we used it as an illustration to point out that God's not running a restaurant taking orders for something to satisfy your spiritual hunger. God's not standing there behind the counter asking if you want tacos or a burrito, steak or chicken, mild or medium salsa when it comes to building your personal spiritual experience.

But that's exactly the God most people want.

I refer to it sometimes as lifeguard Jesus. People want to be able to go to the beach or the pool, have a good time, hang out, do their thing, and they like to know that's there's a lifeguard on duty just in case there's an emergency. But they don't want the lifeguard telling them to stop running. They don't like the lifeguard telling them to stop doing fun things. And they don't want the life guard to come down from their tower and hangout with them, unless he or she is really good looking – and that's where my analogy starts to fall apart a bit, but you get the point.

We want a God who will make our life better, preferably from a comfortable distance. Meanwhile, according to Scripture: [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](#).

So why don't we do that? I'll give you three reasons why faith is hard and then invite you back to dig into the subject deeper next week.

First, we have a hard time following God because the reward seems so far off. Faith operates on a different time horizon. If you looked at the impact of faith on Abel's life the moment before he died, you'd see things one way, but if you pulled back and took in the eternal perspective, you'd see things another way entirely.

Are you looking for your life to be great right now, or forever? It's hard to have both, and often impossible. So, many of us choose to do the things we want to do today and think we'll deal with tomorrow when it comes. It's easy to think we're doing OK spiritually because we say something respectful about God occasionally, and even go to church sometimes, but we're not really pursuing Him, we're busy doing our own thing making all of our decisions based on how we feel today and what we want most.

All of that is related to the second reason we don't diligently seek Him, and that's because we listen to our feelings more than our faith. We allow our desires, our emotions, our imagination, or all the 'what ifs' to talk us out of taking a step of faith.

But listen, this is not just a spiritual phenomenon. You might really and truly believe that you need a surgery. And you might know that the best way for that to happen is for you to be put under while it's happening. You might know that you've got a really great medical team all around you. You know all these things, but it doesn't stop you from feeling nervous, anxious, worried, scared about going under. You have to choose: will you let those feelings rule over you, or will you press on, by faith, with what you know is going to be the best thing for you in the long run?

CS Lewis was once a self-declared atheist and, in his book *Mere Christianity*, he talks about the interaction between feelings and faith. He says, faith is the "the art of holding onto things your reason has accepted, in spite of your changing moods." He admits that sometimes, as a Christian, "the whole thing looks very improbable" but then says that as an atheist there were times when the reverse was true and everything about Christianity seemed to make more sense. His point was moods and feelings change. And he says unless you can teach your moods that they're not in control of your life, you're never going to be a very solid Christian, or even a very solid atheist, you're just some poor creature bouncing all around with its belief driven by the weather and whatever you've had to eat recently.²

Feelings are good, they were given to us by God, but you don't ever want to live your life primarily by them. Faith will require you to go against what feels good or easy at times, and to do things that are right and true simply because they are right and true. The best thing you can do in this life is to put both your feelings and the facts together and let them be the *combined* fuel for your faith.

That brings me to the third reason why we don't diligently seek after God, and that is: we're not sure we can be sure.

Sometimes we see other people doing other things and we're not sure who's right. Now I'll tell you something I found fascinating while preparing for this message. I tend to think this is a very modern issue, that one of the problems with globalization is that it has allowed us to see so many different people and so many different ways of life, but then we have to figure out, how does all of that fit into the things I believe about the world?

² CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 123-4.

The interesting thing is, we forget multiculturalism is actually not new.

In my studies I came across something written by John Bunyan. He lived in the 1600s in England and wrote of his own struggle with uncertainty at one point in life – *four hundred years ago* he knew Christians, Jews, Moors – or Muslims, and Pagans and he had to wrestle with the question *who is right?*

He eventually came to know and believe that the answer is what God had done for man through Christ, and he went on to write the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, the number two most read, most translated book in the English language, behind the Bible, which tells the allegorical story of a man's life as a Christian and all that must be faced and overcome on his way to our heavenly home. I highly recommend everyone read it at least once.

So it's nothing new, or unique to our modern lives, but sometimes it can be hard to diligently seek after God because we see all these other options and we need some time to think and pray through the question: *are we sure?* Can we even be sure?

You're not the first person to do that, countless others have asked it before. And if you are honest and sincere in your search, God will meet you, answer your questions and build your faith, but it's always going to be faith – both for you and for them - and at some point, you will have to decide, which way will you go?

Friends, life is hard, but God is good. He is calling you to come to Him, believe that He is, and that He will [reward you for diligently seeking Him](#). Faith is an essential part of life, you're going to have it, and you're going to put it in something or someone, why not put it in the hands of the God who is reaching out to you, who has sent His Son for you, and who wants to lead you home?

If you lack faith, or want to see it grow, just ask God for help. He doesn't turn people away who come in humility seeking truth. He gives us faith like a gift, which is amazing. Even Jesus' own disciples asked, Lord, increase our faith (Luke 17:5). If the men who ate lunch with Jesus everyday needed to ask for that, how much more do you and I? So let's turn to Him now and ask by faith, to receive more faith, and to follow and trust whether it leads to outcomes like Abel or Enoch.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Hebrews 11:1-6 What is Faith?

Summary: God calls us to a life of faith that requires us to trust in Him, even when life is hard.

- If someone asked you, “What’s the connection between Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 10?” How would you answer? Is it really that important to make a connection? What do we lose by looking at Hebrews 11 all by itself?
- What makes faith hard for you? Is there anything about living by faith that you find comes easily to you? What have you learned makes holding onto your difficult? What have you discovered encourages and builds up your faith?
- Look up 2 Cor 5:7. What does this mean? Can you give any practical applications from your own life?
- Do you lean more on faith or ‘science’ to explain the origins of the world? Do you feel like either one has to exist without the other?
- Abel was killed by a jealous brother while trying to serve God. Have you ever experienced something ‘unfair’ while trying to serve God?
 - And yet, his witness still speaks. Is that encouraging to you in any way? Does it take the edge off of some of the injustice he experienced? Have you seen your witness preserved in anyway?
- Do you ever feel like Enoch – someone attempting to walk with God while everyone else seems to be walking away? Does anything about his life’s story encourage you?
- Read James 1:19-20. Why is the demons’ belief that God exists not enough?
- What kind of rewards have you received from God while seeking Him?
- Are you ready to die? If not, why not? Is there anything you feel like you *have* to do before you die? What would you *like* to do?
- What is the role of faith in helping us to endure hard times in life? Examine Ephesians 6:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8.