

1b Faith – God is and God Has Spoken

Not too long ago, I preached a sermon in Mark about the Lord's return. After the sermon, a man I hadn't seen before approached me and told me he had to meet me to discuss the sermon, and that it was very important. I agreed, we set a day that week and I met him at a nearby restaurant. He opened a jotter, with a lot of handwritten notes and Bible references, and took out his Bible. He then proceeded to tell me that I had said that the Lord was still to return, but I was mistaken. He told me, the Lord has already returned. He took me to verses which said that the Lord would return like a thief, which meant secretly, unrecognised.

I was trying to understand where he was going, until it dawned on me. "Wait a minute", I said, "you're telling me that the Lord has returned secretly, and you know this, because you are the Lord." He nodded. I double-checked. "You're telling me that you are, in fact, God in the flesh, sitting here with me in this coffee shop." "Yes", he said.

Well, I confess I was not feeling what John felt on the Isle of Patmos, a dread sense of reverential awe and a desire to worship. One of the, shall we say, rather numerous clues that I was not sharing a table with my Creator, was the fact that when he took out his Bible, and wanted to take me to the numerous references he had written down, he couldn't find where they were. I had to help him find the references. When one claims to be the author of the Bible, a basic credential is to know the order of the books, I'd say.

Well, that meeting came to an abrupt end. I sternly warned him, and told him his doctrine was an antichrist one and would condemn his soul, and that he needed to repent, sit under the Word of God, submit to a local church, and receive the real Christ as His Saviour.

But in the end, that man wanted a response from me. He wanted me to believe in him. He wanted me to place my faith in him. I would have needed to change my mind about who the Saviour is, transfer my trust to him, and, I suppose follow him. I rather shudder to think of what that would have meant, but there is an example of what faith is.

It's life-changing. What faith is, and who you place it in, is a matter of life and death.

Like all important words, *faith* is one we cannot afford to be vague on. And yet, were we to ask many who claim to be Christians to explain what faith is, many would either be at a loss, or give a vague or unclear explanation.

That's partly because the way the word *faith* is used in our society is quite variable. Sometimes faith means to remain loyal. Someone says, "keep the faith". Sometimes it means a kind of optimism, a hopefulness, as in "just have faith that it will work out". Sometimes it means a kind of religiosity, as when people say, "She's a person of faith" or "this is a faith-based initiative".

And then you add to that how the Prosperity Gospel and the Word-Faith cult have twisted and warped the meaning of faith. In their teaching, faith is act of boastful self-confidence, commanding God to behave a certain way.

But the book of Hebrews is very clear on the meaning of faith. In fact, the theme of the whole book is being faithful, full of faith towards the Finisher of our faith. Like no other book in the New Testament, Hebrews emphasises faith. It calls for it. It warns against the opposite of faith, it explains the basis for it, it takes a whole chapter, chapter 11, to describe it and illustrate it.

Now here is the danger when we read or hear the Bible. If we carry around wrong or faulty definitions of words, then every time we hear that word in the Bible, we read into it our wrong definition. The result is, we read an unbiblical idea into the Bible, and then emerge with an unbiblical idea, which seems to us supported by the Bible. In fact, many of the debates about eternal security and losing your salvation are actually a result of failing to carefully define the meaning of faith, and rushing on to examine texts about eternal life or about falling away which presuppose you have the correct definition of faith.

So to be able to read this book correctly, it is important that we let it explain to us the meaning of faith, the meaning of *believe*. If we don't, we might be thinking we have faith when we don't. We might be troubled when we lack a certain experience, thinking that's what faith must have, when the Bible may not actually say that.

Our focus will be chapter 11, where faith is the focus. Here, in concentrated form, we have a description of what faith is, what faith does, and how long faith lasts.

I. Faith's Description: What Faith Is

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1)

Here you have a description of what faith is. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. You can take those two statements as parallel, slightly different, but largely overlapping ways of saying the same thing.

Now the easier part of this description is the second half of each statement: *things hoped for*, *things not seen*. Faith has to do with things in the future, things **hoped for**, promised but not realised. Certain things are matters of faith when they are promised, as the first coming of Messiah was, but once the thing hoped for has come, it is no longer faith, it is sight, and it becomes part of history.

Faith also has to do with spiritual realities **not seen**, not presently visible to the human eye. There are plenty of realities that the human eye cannot detect: heat, gravity, sound waves, radioactivity, X-Rays. And just as there is a large section of physical reality that the eye cannot see, so there is a large amount of spiritual reality that the eye cannot see. Angels, the spirits of those now dead, heaven and hell, the Holy Spirit indwelling us, the cleansing of sin. And of course, the greatest of those unseen things: God Himself.

Whether we are talking about future promises, or spiritual realities, that's what faith deals with.

Now look at the first part of each of those statements. Faith is the substance, faith is the evidence. **Substance** – also translated assurance, reality, confidence. The idea is one of seeing the underlying reality. You see the reality in something not yet accomplished. Faith treats as present what is future. It takes as certain, and acts on it now.

If you have a business, you begin working on something once ordered. Someone might plan a future event, and you treat that event as definite, and plan around it, even though it hasn't happened yet.

Evidence – some translations have it as conviction, proof. Providing proof that shows something to be the case. So evidence of things not seen means that you regard something as proved, even though your eyes have not seen some kind of physical proof. You believe in gravity, though you haven't seen it. You believe the bank will supply money to your card, though you haven't seen their supply of cash, gold, or other assets.

So let's take those two ideas and bring them together.

Faith is regarding as real and proved what is still promised and unseen. Faith treats promises and invisible truths as true and acts on them.

Faith is not optimism. Faith is not being hopeful. Faith is not being kind of religious. Faith is a way of knowing. It's a kind of knowledge. In fact, it is *the* way of knowing reality. It is how you understand what really is, what really exists, and what it really means.

Compare that with how atheists will tell you that you should know what is out there, the scientific method. How does science know something is true? It observes with the eyes, or with instruments that assist the eyes, it makes hypotheses to explain what it sees, and then it tests those hypotheses with repeatable experiments. That's its way of knowing. And that's fine, when you are investigating the natural world.

But it doesn't work the moment you are dealing with people, with persons. You don't treat people as objects, and experiment on them and record the results. You don't poke someone with a stick, record the result, and then repeat the experiment.

To know people, you talk to them. And as you do that, if any kind of relationship develops, guess what those people do? They make commitments to each other. They give their word. They promise something in the future, and something unseen. Workers to bosses, contractors to customers, husbands and wives to each other. They promise to do something for the other. And on the basis of believing or having faith in the promise, the relationship goes on. In the realm of relationships, when faith or trust is absent, there can be no knowing each other.

So what then is biblical faith based upon? Is it based on upon finding the physical tomb of Jesus to be empty? Is it based upon proving the Shroud of Turin to be authentic? Is it based upon making sure we have the original manuscripts of the Bible, finding the Ark of the Covenant? No, because that would not be evidence of things not seen. It would be evidence of things seen. Not that such things are unimportant, but they don't qualify as faith. As Romans 8:24 puts it, For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? (Rom. 8:24)

What then is biblical faith based upon? Faith is taking someone's Word to be true. Faith does not come by seeing, but by what?

So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Rom. 10:17)

Whose word do we take? Remember, how does this book open?

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; (Heb. 1:1-2)

God spoke. He has given His final and ultimate speech to the world in His Son. He has communicated. Faith is based upon the character of the one who makes the promise. This is faith's foundation: God is, and God has spoken. Faith assumes that to be as true as your own existence. And then the character of God allows us to trust what He says.

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, 14 saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." 15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. 16 For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for

confirmation *is* for them an end of all dispute. 17 Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed *it* by an oath, 18 that by two immutable things, in which it *is* impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before *us*. (Heb. 6:13-18)

You see, why didn't I place my trust in that man who claimed to be God? Because his character couldn't support his claims. He couldn't find verses in his Bible. So why should I believe Jesus Christ? Because of the character of the One saying it. God is, and God has spoken, and His ultimate speech has come through His Son. Whatever He says, I believe because of His character.

Remember the rich man in Hell? He was told that if his brothers would not believe the Scriptures, Moses and the prophets, they would not believe though one rose from the dead. Jesus refused to give signs to those who did not believe His Word. Thomas was told that those who believed without seeing would be blessed. Jesus told the crowd of almost Christians: "But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. (Jn. 6:36)

That's what faith is: a way of knowing based upon the Word of another.

But Hebrews is not just about knowing what faith is, it is about exercising faith. What does faith do? Once you regard what God says about the future and the unseen world as present and real, what do you then do?

II. Faith's Action: What Faith Does

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. (Heb. 11:6)

What does this text tell us about what faith does? Look at the second phrase. What action does the writer describe as the action of a person who believes that God is and that God is a rewarder? He describes the believer as one who *comes* to God.

This is important because faith is more than an agreement of the intellect. This is a motion, a movement of the inner man in a certain direction. It is important to see this motion described by Jesus Himself.

And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. (Jn. 6:35)

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. (Jn. 6:37)

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. 45 "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. (Jn. 6:44-45)

64 "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. 65 And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." (Jn. 6:64-65)

40 "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (Jn. 5:40)

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. (Jn. 14:6)

17 And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Rev. 22:17)

What does this mean? It means that when you take God's Word as true, you believe His promises as

if they're present, you believe His description of invisible reality as if its in front of you, then you act with a motion of the soul. You act by going towards God. You approach Him through His Son for all that He offers.

Like the Israelite, if you believed God's Word, you would take the journey from your hometown and go towards Jerusalem. Once there, you would go to the market and purchase an animal. And then with that goat or lamb in your arms, you approached the Temple. And as you approached, the priests showed you where to wash and where to stand, and then you went to the altar of burnt offering, and there you made the sacrifice with the priest's assistance.

You didn't stay in your village, musing about how Israel's God is the true one, and how the Scriptures are the truth, while ignoring the commands for how your sin was to be atoned. No, if your faith was a real faith, you approached. You went to God through His appointed means.

Well, throughout Hebrews, what is another term for this coming, this approach, this act of faith?

for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. (Heb. 7:19)

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and *having* a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19-22)

38 Now the just shall live by faith; But if *anyone* draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." 39 But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Heb. 10:38-39)

It's also put in similar words in chapter 4 and chapter 13.

16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:16)

13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (Heb. 13:13)

Hebrews knows nothing of a faith that investigates, but does not draw near. Hebrews would not regard as faith a mere mental agreement without a heart movement. To believe is to come.

This is why Jesus said to those people in John 6, many of whom were following Him, listening to Him daily, essentially living with Him, 64 "But there are some of you who do not believe." (Jn. 6:64)

It is possible to be around Jesus, to agree with Jesus, even to follow Jesus, but yet never to actually come to Jesus. Because at the heart of faith is what Hebrews 11:6 says:

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. (Heb. 11:6)

Faith approaches God for the reward of what God offers. Faith is motivated by the promise that there is something better, and something sweeter, and something more satisfying than what I can see with my eyes, or experience with my present senses. That reward is the experience of God Himself in Jesus Christ. He offers knowledge of Himself, and enjoyment of Himself. He offers forgiveness, yes, reconciliation, yes, but then, best of all, communion. Fellowship. Union and oneness.

And here is where we can tell the difference between true and false faith. Real faith draws near,

comes to God for who He is, it tastes and sees that the Lord is good. It is not mere mental persuasion. If you could be argued into faith, then you can be argued out of it, too. No, faith has its reasons, but faith is not merely a set of reasons. Faith, because of the reliable Word spoken by God, actually goes to Him in the act of your inner man, approaching God for all He is, experiencing God with the eyes of faith.

I understand the dangers of a so-called Christianity that has no intellectual substance, and is nothing more than sentiments and experiences and feelings without truth. But the opposite danger is a so-called Christianity caught up only in ideas, concepts, facts, figures, and truths with absolutely no heart-embrace, and inner experience of those truths. The old hymn sang, "Have you *been* to Jesus for his cleansing power, are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

Maybe we need to replace the word *accept* Jesus with a different term. *Accept* can mean invite in, but it can also mean to reluctantly agree. "I accept that idea." Perhaps we need to use words with the biblical ideas of motion. "Come to Christ" "Go to Jesus". "Receive Him" "Draw near to God".

What is faith? Faith regards as real and proved what is promised and unseen because of the word of the One saying it. What does faith do? Faith goes to God in His Son for all He is.

Lastly, how long does this faith last?

III. Faith's Duration: How Long Faith Lasts

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

The writer lists out sixteen people in Hebrews 11, each of whom regarded God's Word as reliable enough to act on, and so each drew near to God in trusting faith. And very importantly, every one of them, kept trusting to the very end.

¹³ **These all died in faith**, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. (Heb. 11:13)

How did they finish their course? In faith.

And the ultimate example is Jesus. Jesus, the true finisher of the faith, did not stop trusting when He got to the Cross. There, He despised the shame, kept the future joy in mind, and finished. Now he sits at the right hand of God.

On that basis, with Jesus our ultimate example, and all these other examples, how long are we supposed to keep drawing near? Verse 1: We lay aside weights and sins, and we run with endurance, the entire race set before us.

⁶ but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end. (Heb. 3:6)

¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, (Heb. 3:14)

¹⁴ Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. (Heb. 4:14)

23 Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is* faithful. (Heb. 10:23)

When Jesus told the parable of the soils, He wasn't trying to say some people have faith that dies. No, the whole power of the illustration lies in the idea that what dies or lives on the surface is explained by what is unseen, underground, under the surface. The fact that plants have a visible surface aspect, and a hidden, invisible root system is how Jesus distinguishes between cause and effect, root and fruit, faith and works. The visible surface aspect of the plant is likened to what we see in people's lives, their outward actions, the works. But the hidden, subsurface root system is like the inner man, the heart, the faith. That's where faith is or isn't. And Jesus point was to say, Under the surface, there may be a hard heart, there may be an impulsive heart, there may be a worldly, idolatrous heart. Faith does not germinate there. Yes, religious interest may germinate, religious persuasion may develop, but not faith. Only the good and noble heart can host faith.

That then explains what you see outwardly. And what might look very similar at first is shown to be very different simply with the passing of time. Real faith, the fourth soil, endures. False, incomplete, selfish, merely cerebral faith cannot endure. In fact, God deliberately sends trials to prove that it is not his seed in them, For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith. (1 Jn. 5:4)

God doesn't send trials so as to kill genuine faith. Quite the opposite. He sends trials, according to Peter 7 that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, (1 Pet. 1:7)

You see, it's an inseparable triad. If you truly trust God's character, then you'll regard what He says about the future and the invisible world as true. If you really regard what He says about the future and the invisible world as true, then you will truly draw near, seeking God for the reward of all he is. And if you truly draw near to God for all He is, then you will, for the joy set before you, keep drawing near, you will hold fast. That's faith's definition, faith's action, and faith's duration.

How are you going to be faithful to the finished faith? Let me ask you three questions.

What is your attitude towards God's voice? If faith is based upon trusting the word of another, what is your current attitude towards His Word? I mean that in terms of how often you hear it, with what carefulness you hear it, with what effort you make to remember it.

What kind of movement is there between your soul and God? Faith's posture is not passive observance, it is action, it is worship, it is desire, it is love. What movement is there in your daily routine that is an act of you going towards God, in acts of dependence, or confession, or thanksgiving, or adoration, or request.

What are trials doing to the two things I've just mentioned? Are trials destroying your confidence in God's Word? Do you find yourself having less interest, less appetite to God's Word? Are trials causing you to draw back from God, from the things of God? Or are they drawing you in?

Faith is a gift of God. But it is a gift that can be received, and a gift that can be cultivated. Are you hearing submissively, approaching expectantly, and enduring steadfastly?