

Faith Before the Flood

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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.

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.

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7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. (Heb. 11:1-7)

Anyone who has experienced any kind of eye problem, from myopia to glaucoma, to macular degeneration knows that it is difficult to have your window on the world become misty or foggy or narrowed, or even blacked out.

But in fact, most people walk around with that very problem with the eyes of their heart. There are more eyes than just the ones in your skull. Your inner person also has eyes, the ability to perceive and know far more than colours and shapes. The eyes of your soul try to perceive what the world is really like, what it means, why we are here, what is really important. When the eyes of your soul do not see, your experience of reality is just like that of someone with physical blindness. Life is confusing, unpredictable, and dangerous.

The Bible has a word for having 20/20 vision of the soul, for seeing what God sees. That word is faith. Today we begin perhaps the most famous chapter in the Bible on faith.

Some chapters in the Bible become so famous that people forget that they are chapters within a book. First Corinthians 13 is so famous for its glorious and poetic description of love, that people forget it comes in between two chapters on spiritual gifts, chapter 12 telling you what the gifts are, and chapter 14 telling you how they were to function in Corinth. Chapter 13 explains that spiritual gifts without love are useless.

Romans 9 has become famous for its teaching on election, but it comes right after Romans 8 which teaches life in the Spirit and eternal security. Romans 9 explains whether Israel lost its salvation, whether God can choose someone and then have them forfeit their salvation. We could list many more examples, but Hebrews 11 is one of those chapters. It is justly celebrated as a glorious faith hall of fame. It fires our imaginations, it stirs our affections. But sometimes its context is forgotten.

Hebrews 11 comes in between chapters 10 and chapters 12. If you want to understand what Hebrews 11 is doing, you need to read what came before and what comes just after.

35 Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 37 "For yet a little while, *And* He who is coming will come and will not tarry. 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. 10:35-39)

Imagine there is no chapter heading there. We go straight from "those who believe to the saving of the soul" into "Now Faith is the evidence..." Look at how chapter 12 begins.

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)

In light of these witnesses just described in chapter 11, let us run with endurance this race, looking to Jesus, the ultimate author and finisher of the faith for all these people and for us.

In other words, chapter 10 was exhorting us to have faith: draw near to Christ, hold fast your confession, exhort each other, don't draw back, or cast away, and now chapter 12 says, keep drawing near, keep running, don't give up, look to Christ. This message of enduring faith is just before chapter 11 and right after it. So what is chapter 11? It is one long illustration of this faith that draws near and holds fast. In fact, there isn't a single command in these 40 verses. If you want to see the application, the command, it is back in chapter 10: draw near, hold fast, consider one another, don't cast away your confidence, and then in chapter 12: run with endurance. Chapter 11 is a chapter-long illustration of what this faith looks like in real people. It's all illustration.

Every preacher imagines that people are going to remember his sermon for its clever outline, its main points, its wealth of Scriptural references. But in fact, the humbling reality is that the thing which really sticks in people's mind are our illustrations. The stories we tell, the word-pictures we paint, the analogies we give: these are what people really remember. Years later, someone will still recall some illustration, even though they can't remember the sermon that was attached to it.

That's because humans are imaginative beings. We love stories, we love analogies, we love mind-pictures. Those are the things that really help us to understand difficult ideas or really abstract thoughts.

Hebrews 11 functions like one long illustration. In fact, it is a corridor of illustrations of at least 17 characters from the Old Testament, all of whom exercised faith. He has spoken about faith, and commended the importance of faith, but now he simply gets to point at various people who were well-known to his Jewish readers. He points and says, "See, faith is like that. Or like that. That's what faith is. That's what faith does."

Faith is like many words in the Bible that suffer from overuse. Not only does the word and its derivatives come up hundreds of times, but we sing about faith, and pray for faith, talk about keeping the faith, or having faith. On top of that, we now live in the middle of a massive false teaching which re-defines faith to be some kind of demanding certainty that compels God to act in your favour. So, like a badly worn R10 note, the word faith is in danger of losing its value. Hebrews 11 breathes new life into that word because we see it fleshed out.

Now not only is this Hebrews 11 powerful because of the amount of illustrations, it is also powerful because of the age of the illustrations. The writer is able to draw a line of continuity from the son of Adam, through the Flood, after Babel, into the birth of the Hebrew nation, through Moses, the Exodus, the kings, the prophets. If Christianity was being accused of being a new kid on the block, a sect with no history, no tradition, the response was, no, faith has been the principle of relating to God from the very beginning. Faith in Messiah Jesus is not a new religion, it is the oldest religion, stretching back before there were Hebrews. He is showing that faith in God's salvation was also the true faith of Israel, and even the true faith of those who lived in the world before the Flood.

So that's the portion of the illustration we want to consider this morning: faith before the flood. Faith illustrated in that world we know the least about: the strange first world, the world before it was radically re-shaped and re-made after a global catastrophe.

Sometimes people ask, what about all the people who lived before the coming of Jesus? How were they saved? Well first, of the estimated 105 billion people who have ever lived, only 2 percent of them lived before the time of Christ. The other 103 billion have all lived after the time of Christ and have been responsible to respond to what they have heard about His coming.

Second, in those seven to four thousand years before He came, men were responsible to believe that the one true God was a saving God, and place their faith in Him and His provisions. In other words, the true faith was always that Yahweh saves men, that they need saving and that He will forgive them and save them if they look to Him and trust Him. Now the clarity of how He would save them became clearer and sharper as the centuries went by. But men were always responsible to believe that Yahweh is salvation, and that it is by His grace, and must be received, believed. Of course, the Hebrew for Yahweh is Salvation is Yahshua, which is the name Yeshua, Joshua, or in Greek, Jesus.

So, what he will do in this chapter is begin by reminding us of the point of faith, and then give us pictures of faith. He will tell us why faith is needful, and then show us examples of faith.

I. The Point of Faith

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.

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)

We are given first a description of what faith does, here and in verse 6. This is not a definition, but a description of what faith does.

According to verse 1, faith is a kind of knowledge. It is a kind of perception. It is the substance of things hoped for, evidence of things not seen. Substance has the idea of a foundation, an actual thing you can lean on or launch off or put your weight on. Faith experiences hoped-for things as concrete, present realities.

Faith is the evidence of things not seen. Notice, it doesn't say, faith is result of evidence, or the response to evidence. It says, faith itself is the evidence. Faith persuades of the existence of unseen realities.

Faith is a way of knowing and seeing reality. It can see what God sees. It knows truths about reality that God knows. Realities that the world scoffs at: God's existence, the reality of sin, Christ's atonement, Heaven and Hell, coming reward, coming judgement, His intercession for us, angelic and demonic beings. By faith, we see these things, not as colours and shapes, but as realities known to our souls.

Real faith is not just persuasion or entertaining certain mental ideas. Jonathan Edwards once said this about the difference between faith built upon absolute conviction and mere persuasion. He realised that some people were persuaded that Christianity was true the way people in other religions are persuaded their religion is true. They are persuaded because of their upbringing, their education, and the opinion of people they love. Edwards says this isn't really faith as the Bible defines it.

So what produces real faith? Edwards struggled with this. Though he himself was highly educated, he preached and ministered among the North American Indians. He knew that if knowing highly

complicated historical proofs for the resurrection, or highly complex arguments for the existence of God were necessary for faith, then his people didn't have a hope.

But Edwards knew the truth. Faith doesn't come by arguing, or by deduction, or by detective work. He said it happens in one step.

“The mind ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory. . . . men may come to a reasonable solid persuasion and conviction of the truth of the gospel, by the internal evidences of it, in the way that has been spoken, viz. by a sight of its glory”

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing of the Word of God. When God's Word is read and preached and spoken, the Spirit works to create faith. You see the truth of what is being preached. You understand it and embrace it, and it is now as real to you as any other reality in your life. You don't first understand so as to believe. As Anselm said, I believe in order to understand. God uses His Word to authenticate His Word. He creates faith. He gives it to us, and it must be received.

In fact, verse 3 shows that it is foundational to understanding anything in creation.

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.

You see, when it comes to creation, there was only one observer there to see it. We either take His Word for it, or nothing else will persuade us. It is good to study the evidences for design in the universe. But you either begin with the idea that non-life created life, or you start with faith that the Life created all other life. You either begin with the presupposition that says nothing created everything or you begin with the faith that says the absolute Being created everything. Either matter created minds, or a mind created matter. And there is no empirical evidence for the absolute beginning of the universe. It is a faith step either way. Faith is how we understand the first verse of the Bible, and make sense of everything after that.

So the only way we know how things began is because the only One who was there tells us how it began. Faith must have revelation to respond to. As those realities are opened to you, you must receive them, and embrace them, and move towards them. That's why verse 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)

You see the truths of what God reveals: His beauty, the glories of Heaven, the horrors of sin and Hell, the loveliness of Christ, your need of Him, your desire for Him, and so you diligently seek Him. You believe He is a rewarder, He is good to His Word, His promises are real, and you go to Him for His salvation, and His promises.

Faith is a kind of sight that involves movement. Faith is knowing and therefore drawing near. Faith is spiritual apprehension and pursuit of God's beauty.

Faith is like the middle term between love and hope. Hope is all that God said He would be and do for us. Love is the desire and delight we have in Him. Faith is then the love reaching out for that hope. It sees that future, invisible hope as real, and so it draws near, diligently seeking Him. Hope is the metal, Love is the magnet, faith is the magnetic force drawing near.

This is the point of faith: it is a God-given, and humbly received knowledge. No one gets to boast

that they found God through being smart or diligent, or industrious or virtuous. Everyone must accept it as a gift. God gets to retain all the glory, and men get all the benefit.

That's why you cannot please God with your own religion. You cannot please God with being good. You cannot please God by being better than the worst people in the world. You cannot please God by avoiding certain things, and perhaps doing some others. You can only please God if you give Him all the glory and credit for saving you, and you can only do that by faith.

God opens your eyes so that you see what He sees, and you know what He knows, and you embrace it and you draw near to Him for all that He offers you.

Faith is the only way to know truth, and so it is the only way to please God.

II. The Pictures of Faith

a) *Abel* – True Worship

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.

The writer skips over Adam and Eve, presumably because the Bible only seems to show their unbelief, and goes to the very first recorded instance of faith: Abel's sacrifice. You remember the incident. Cain was a tiller of the ground. Abel kept sheep, probably for their wool, because it seems that at this time, man was not yet eating meat, or at least not by permission. We read that God was not pleased with Cain's sacrifice, but he was pleased with Abel's.

Now a lot of speculation has arisen over why God was pleased with Abel's and not Cain's. Some insist that it was because Abel's sacrifice was a blood sacrifice, and Cain's was not. But this seems odd, since in the Law it was possible to present a grain sacrifice. Blood sacrifices were required for sin offerings, but Genesis doesn't tell us that this was a sin offering. And it would be odd to dock Cain for bringing what he worked with, unless they had been given some special revelation telling them to bring animals.

But what we do read here is that Abel's sacrifices was more pleasing (lit. "fuller") than Cain's because he offered by faith. He trusted in whatever God had revealed to him, and he lovingly drew near to God in trusting worship. Abel's faith caused him to obtain witness that he was righteous. His heart was regenerate. Maybe he was the first saved man. And though he is dead, his testimony of true worship still speaks. Death is never the last word in the life of a righteous man.

All we know about Cain is that he didn't draw near with faith. Perhaps he ignored what had been revealed and came up with his own worship. Perhaps he showed no real trusting sacrifice in his giving. Perhaps he drew near with his lips, but his heart was far from God. Whatever it was, it was unbelief.

And we know what he did when he saw that Abel had pleased God and he hadn't. He murdered him. Cain killed Abel because human works hate grace. Proud, independent religion hates this empty-handed trusting faith. It hates the freeness of grace, the lack of boasting in faith. It wants merit, it wants to keep score, it wants control, so it hates and persecutes those who say God's grace cannot be bought or earned. Jesus even called Abel one of those persecuted for righteousness.

What does faith look like? It looks like trusting God's Word and drawing near in true sacrificial worship.

His next illustration is the enigmatic Enoch.

b) Enoch – Walking With God

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.

Enoch, the father of Methuselah is the only interesting one in the otherwise mundane genealogy of Genesis 5. Instead of living to the 800 or 900 years that the others lived to, Enoch was raptured, caught up bodily into Heaven at the age of 365.

Enoch lived in a time when the Earth was filled with murderous and violent people, filled with Nephilim and demonic religion, filled with monstrous perversions of nature. But Jude tells us that Enoch prophesied against all this and proclaimed the coming of Messiah. Enoch lived by faith by believing what God said about the evil generation he lived in. He pleased God and lived for God's pleasure.

Enoch also drew near to God for all that He is, and continued to do so. That's the meaning of the term used in Genesis 5:22: Enoch walked with God. To walk with someone is draw near to them, to keep in step with them, to communicate with them, to go where they are going.

What does faith look like? It looks like drawing near in a life of trusting, separated worship.

c) Noah

7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Noah lived shortly after Enoch, when the world had reached its peak of ungodliness. Noah received grace and believed. Not only did he believe in the true God and his saving grace, but he believed to the point of trusting God to do an extraordinary thing. God warned him about the coming flood. Noah had never seen rain, never seen anything like a Flood, and probably hadn't seen a boat, let alone built one. But we read that he was moved by a godly fear, and prepared this Ark which not only saved his family, but its very construction preached coming judgement to the surrounding world. He became a preacher of coming judgement, both in his words, and in his work of building a boat that was 5 stories high, 150 metres long, which is the length of one and half soccer fields.

You can imagine the scorn and the ridicule that came to Noah from the surrounding culture. Noah the crazy boat maker. Noah who builds boats to float on land. Noah the zoo-keeper on a boat.

As we piece together the Scriptures, it appears that it took Noah between 55 and 75 years to build the Ark. That's a long ministry of preaching coming judgement. It's a long time to endure all the scorn and objections and disbelief as life went on around you as normal, as Jesus said people feasting and marrying until the very day that Noah and his family got on board.

But in all those years, Noah kept drawing near to God for all He is, trusting in God's promises, believing what He said about coming judgement, preaching the gospel, and enduring. And how many souls did he win over? Apparently none, except if you count his sons. Sometimes, those with faith are a tiny minority.

What does faith look like? It looks like drawing near to God in real worship, like Abel. It looks like walking with God in real enduring communion. It looks like trusting God even when the whole

world scorns you.

Augustine was once approached by a pagan who pointed to his idol and said, 'There's my God, where's yours? Again, he pointed to the sun, and said, "There's my God, where's yours?" Augustine said, "I did not show him my God, not because I did not have one to show Him, but because he did not have eyes to see Him."

What do you see this morning, with the eyes of your heart? As we sang about God and Christ and Heaven, what did your heart see? As we read the Word today, could you see? As you have heard this text now explained, is it as plainly true to you as the fact that you can hear me? If so, then rejoice! Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear! Draw near, hold fast, run with endurance.

But if this truth sounds to you like an overheard conversation, if this seems like a faraway call, then say with that man in the Gospel, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.