

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Christ in Hebrews
 SERMON: *God's Hall of Faith: The Gallery of the Ancients*
 SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 11:1-7
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
 DATE: March 7, 2010

Hebrews 11:1-7

¹*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ²This is what the ancients were commended for.*

³*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ⁴By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.*

⁵*By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

⁷*By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

The book of Hebrews is packed full of theology. It is right up there with Romans. But sometimes books like Hebrews and Romans are so full of theology that we miss the reason for which they were written. The author of Hebrews is first and foremost a pastor, not a theologian, and his heart for his flock is what led him to write this book. The major pastoral concern of Hebrews is perseverance. The author is aware that his readers are being tempted to drift back into Judaism and so he continually urges them to persevere in the Christian faith, but he understands that exhortation alone will not motivate them. And so he uses theology to motivate them to persevere as well.

In fact he spends most of the first 10 chapters showing them that Christ is supreme over all things, especially the Judaism they are being tempted to drift back into. He also reminds them of the eternal hope they have in Christ. He also warns them of the danger of not persevering. But in chapter 11 he takes a break from heavy theology and sharp exhortation to give a number of powerful illustrations. These illustrations or examples show what faith that perseveres looks like.

There are at least 20 of these examples. We'll look at 3 of the examples this morning. But before giving the examples the author gives a brief description of faith in verses 1-2. Let's start by looking at this description.

Description of Faith (vv. 1-2)

11:1 *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

First of all, it is important to realize that the author of Hebrews is not trying to give an exhaustive definition of faith in this verse. Instead he is giving a description of faith that applies specifically to the situation of his readers. I've listed four of aspects of this description in your outline.

1. Faith perseveres.

Verse 1 itself doesn't say faith perseveres, but the context makes it plain. Notice this famous chapter on faith is bracketed by two commands to persevere. The commands make it clear that true faith by definition perseveres.

10:35-36 *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe [have faith] and are saved.*

Then, in chapter 11 all the examples of faith are examples of faith that perseveres to the end, in spite of great challenges.

12:1 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

When the author of Hebrews uses the word "faith" in chapter 11 he has in mind a faith that perseveres to the end. Any faith that doesn't persevere to the end proves to be inadequate.

2. Faith hopes.

11:1 *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for...*

What does it mean that faith hopes? Let me tell you first what it doesn't mean. A lot of times when I hear someone say, "I have faith" they mean something like this: "I sure hope things work out," or "I am certain everything is going to be alright." But this is a subjective meaning of a faith that hopes. When this verse says, "...faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see," it is speaking in completely objective terms; the hope being spoken of is an objective reality even though it is not visible at the present time.

And what is this invisible objective reality; what is this hope? Hebrews calls it the promised eternal inheritance (9:15); we might simply call it the hope of heaven. There are many verses in Hebrews that show this; I'd like to look at three this morning. As I read these verses notice how the call to persevere is linked with hope.

9:15 *For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive **the promised eternal inheritance...***

10:23 *Let us hold unswervingly to **the hope** we profess, for he who **promised** is faithful.*

10:36 *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has **promised**.*

11:1 *Now faith is being sure of what we **hope for** and certain of what we do not see.*

A faith that hopes will look forward to this promised eternal inheritance with complete confidence that God will keep his promise. A faith that hopes will live life differently here, because of the treasure of heaven. A forward looking hope is necessary for perseverance.

The phrase “by faith” is used 18 times in chapter 11. The first instance, in verse 3, deals with creation. The rest of the instances progress chronologically all the way through verse 40. Then at the beginning of chapter 12 we are commanded to fix our eyes on Jesus. It’s as if all of the people listed in the hall of faith from creation onward were looking forward to Jesus by faith (whether consciously or not).

As Mike said last week, if we’re going to guard against falling away (apostasy) and persevere in the faith we actually have to look backward and forward. We have to look backward to the cross, and be reminded of the Gospel that we put our trust in. But we also have to look forward to the objective hope of our eternal inheritance and the promise that he will one day return. This two-directional faith is what we need to be faithful.

The author of Hebrews tells us in 10:32-34 that in the early days his readers had a faith that “...*joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property because [they] knew that [they] had better and lasting possessions.*” Their ability to persevere and to experience suffering and loss in this life was a result of looking forward to the treasure of their eternal inheritance.

Maggie and I traveled to Louisville, KY last weekend for a conference on adoption. The conference was really good and I hope to share with you some of what I’m learning regarding the Bible’s teaching on adoption and orphan care sometime in June. But today I’d like to share a story that made a big impression on me.

Dan Cruver, one of the speakers, had been saving money for a number of years for his 15th wedding anniversary. He and his wife had planned to spend their anniversary in Ireland, and were especially looking forward to visiting the many castles in Ireland. But the year they planned to go on their trip a phone call changed their plans.

There was a child in their community who needed a family to adopt him. But this opportunity was sprung on them when they were least expecting it. They received a phone call one day and this is what the caller told them: There is boy who is up for adoption. Pray about it and talk to your wife, but I need to know in the next 5 minutes. If you decide to move forward with the adoption you’ll have the boy tomorrow.

Dan and his wife made the decision to adopt this child, but they didn’t have any money set aside for the adoption. They chose to use the money they had set aside for Ireland to pay for the adoption. However, even though they forfeited the money they had set aside, they didn’t forfeit their dream of seeing Ireland.

They reasoned, in that moment, that they would still see Ireland one day, but not in this life. They believe that they will see Ireland in the new heaven and the new earth. And they believe that the Ireland they will see will be a new and better Ireland; an Ireland that is not still groaning, as Romans 8:22 says, but an Ireland that is free from bondage and decay; an Ireland that will share in the glory of everything that Christ has redeemed. They will see this Ireland when they enter their promised eternal inheritance.

A faith that looks forward to better and lasting possessions can experience much loss in this life. I confess to you that I don't have a faith like Dan Cruver. So I'm praying for God to make me more convinced of the great treasures I have in Christ.

I don't tell that story because I think we should all drain our savings accounts and spend it on the needy. But I would be so bold as to ask us to examine our hearts. Do we really believe that our promised eternal inheritance is of far surpassing worth than the things we spend our time and money on? Or is that which is visible crowding out the invisible treasures we have in Christ? Is there a circumstance in your life right now that may be testing your faith? Are you being called to let go of something that is visible so that you may cling more closely to the invisible treasures that are found only in Christ? As you spend time with God this week, ask him to make the objective reality of your inheritance more real and more dear to you than it is today.

3. Faith justifies.

11:2 *This is what the ancients were commended for.*

This word "commended" comes from the Greek word, *martyreo*, which is where we get the word martyr. The word literally means to bear witness or to testify. Someone who dies for what they believe is called a martyr because their death is a witness or a testimony to their belief. In verse 2 God is the subject of the verb; God is the one bearing witness or giving the testimony; God is the one doing the commending. God commended the ancients because of their faith. They had a faith that looked forward and believed in God's promises and so they were commended by God. But what does it mean when God himself commends someone.

11:4 *By faith [Abel] was commended as a righteous man,*

When God commends someone, he gives testimony, or bears witness on their behalf that they are righteous. If the apostle Paul were writing this letter he would probably say, "The ancients were justified by faith." To be justified is to be declared innocent or righteous. When the author of Hebrews says, they were commended for their faith, he is saying the same thing – they were declared righteous by God.

It is important for us to see that this chapter never says the ancients were commendable people who did commendable things; it simply says they were commended by God, through faith. This is great news! We are not commendable either. As a matter of fact we are sinners who deserve nothing but the eternal wrath of God. But if we have faith in Christ, we are commended by God and are heirs of the eternal inheritance, which is our hope. When God testifies (on our behalf), we are justified. But if we are justified, then we will also testify.

4. Faith testifies.

The same word that is translated “commended” in verses 2, 4, 5, and 39 is also translated as “witnesses” in 12:1: “*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.*”¹

Those who have a faith that results in God’s commendation will live lives that give witness to that faith. Those who have a faith that justifies will live lives that testify. Faith is invisible, and the *object* of our faith and hope is invisible, but the *evidence* of our faith should not be invisible. The lives we live by faith should be a visible witness or testimony of an invisible reality. This is the main emphasis in all of the examples of faith given in chapter 11, and that is why they are called the great cloud of witnesses in 12:1.

Witnesses of faith: the ancients (vv. 3-7)

Now that we have described what faith is, let’s examine the first three examples of faith listed in chapter 11.

1. Abel

11:4a *By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.*

The story of Cain and Abel is found in Genesis 4.

Gen 4:2-5 *Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.*

There has been a lot of speculation as to why Abel’s offering was better than Cain’s. Some have said that Abel’s offering was better because it was a blood sacrifice, as opposed to a grain offering, but I don’t think the content of the offering is what determines God’s favor. *What* is offered is not the main thing here, but the one *who* offers it is. Abel was a man of faith who had a right heart before God; Cain didn’t. Genesis tells us that God looked with favor on *Abel* (and his offering). It wasn’t the offering that first pleased God; it was Abel’s faith and his heart. And a life lived in faith is pleasing to God. Verse 6 tells us that “*without faith it is impossible to please God.*”

There are people who don’t have faith in Christ who do “good” things. But “good” deeds are not what earn God’s favor, for as it says in Isaiah 64:6 in the eyes of a holy God our good deeds are like filthy rags. Christ’s righteousness imputed to us through faith is the only thing that will justify us before a holy God. But when we have been commended by God through faith we will live lives that bear witness to that faith and that is pleasing to God. Or as 10:38 says, “*my righteous one will live by faith.*” When we have been justified, our lives will testify, as Abel’s life did. That’s why the last part of verse 4 says, “*and by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.*”

¹ *Martyreo* is the cognate verb of the noun *martyres*.

Will your life of faith still speak after you are dead? I asked a few people this week to give me a list of people from First Free who are no longer living, but whose life of faith still speaks. Here are a few of the names I was given (I trust that most of you will know at least some of these): John and Ann Gee, Lawrence Hill, Randall Rice, Richard and Myrna Long, David Cloud, Bonnie Johnson, Rebecca Lear, Anita Bengtson, Mary Tembrink, and Linda Hanneman. We could list many more, but these lives serve as examples of lives that had a forward-looking, hope-filled faith that still speaks.

What about your faith. Are you living a life now that will speak of your faith after you are gone? What will people say about you. The author of Hebrews urges his readers in 6:12 to *“imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”* Let us also imitate Abel and others who have gone before us by living lives that bear witness to our faith in Christ.

2. Enoch

11:5 *By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.*

We don't know much about Enoch, but most of what we know about him comes from Genesis 5, which gives a genealogy from Adam to Noah. I'd like to give you the “Cliff's Notes” version of that chapter.

Adam became the father of Seth, then he died.

Seth became the father of Enosh, then he died.

Enosh became the father of Kenan, then he died.

Kenan became the father of Mahalalel, then he died.

Mahalalel became the father of Jared, then he died.

Jared became the father of Enoch, then he died.

Enoch became the father of Methuselah when he was 65. After that Enoch walked with God 300 years, and then he was no more, because God took him away.

Methuselah became the father of Lamech, then he died.

Lamech became the father of Noah, then he died.

Everyone in this genealogy lives a long time, has at least one son, and then they die. Everyone that is, except for Enoch. Enoch is set apart from the rest of the people in this genealogy because Enoch had faith that was marked by a living relationship with God. It seems as though Enoch had a conversion experience of sorts when he was 65, then he walked with God for the rest of his life on earth. What this means is Enoch had a close intimacy and fellowship with God.² Hebrews uses different language and tells us Enoch pleased God. We know that he lived by faith, because without faith it is impossible to please God.

² O'Brien, pp. 404-405.

After Enoch walked with God 300 years he was no more because God took him away. I don't know exactly what this means, but there is one thing that seems plain: Enoch may have changed his location, but he didn't change his company; he may have changed where he was at, but he didn't change who he was with. Enoch walked with God on this earth and Enoch walks with God even now.³

The book of Hebrews urges us to draw near to God many times. The only way we can draw near to God is if we have faith, or as verse 6 says, "*anyone who comes to him must believe he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*" Before we can live in a relationship with a holy God we need a faith that justifies. Then after we have been saved, we need to earnestly seek after a living relationship with God. Our salvation requires no effort on our part, but living in a relationship with God requires daily effort, as all relationships do. We are called to persevere in the faith and to have a faith that looks forward to our eternal inheritance, but perseverance and hope happen in the context of a growing relationship with God, where we walk with God and draw near to him daily.

A faith that justifies will also testify. Our daily walk with God is a testimony to our faith. This is one reason I've urged each of you to spend time with God each day reading his Word. I encourage you to enter into the presence of God daily; get used to it, for through faith you will be spending eternity in his presence.

3. Noah

11:7a *By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.*

The main thing that Noah did was he took God at his Word. He was warned about things he couldn't see, but he believed anyway. Each week before I preach I read over Isaiah 66:2b and pray that I would become more like the one described in this verse. It says, "*This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.*" This was the attitude of Noah when he received the Word of God. He received the Word of God and responded in holy fear, or reverence. He not only believed God, but he proved his faith by obedient action; he responded to God's Word.

The best preaching calls for specific application. I've got a lot to learn about how to go beyond explanation of a text to application, but there is one thing I'm confident I can say to you. When you read God's Word, or hear it preached, you are called to obey what it says. You're not necessarily called to obey what a preacher or teacher says, except to the degree that they are faithful to God's Word. And when you do so not only will it be pleasing to God, but it will be a testimony to the world.

11:7b *By his faith he condemned the world*

Abel's life speaks mainly to believers and encourages them to live lives of faith. This verse tells us that Noah's faith spoke to the world. We learn from 2 Peter 2:5 that Noah was a preacher of

³ Begg, December 2007.

righteousness. And I don't doubt that Noah told the people he came in contact with of the coming judgment. And I don't doubt that Noah urged them to repent. And so there is a possibility that Noah preached a message of condemnation to the world. But I don't think that is the point here. For the emphasis is on Noah's obedience, not his preaching.⁴ Noah's life of obedience stood in such contrast to the ungodliness all around him that his life itself condemned the world. Noah's faith in action stood in such contrast to the world's unbelief that his actions condemned the world.

You've probably heard the quote that is often attributed to St. Francis that says, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words." I don't like this quote for two reasons. First, we are commanded to preach the Gospel. Second, I think some people hide behind this quote as an excuse to not share the Gospel. They think if they just live a good life it will be good enough. The problem is none of us live really good lives, and nobody was ever saved by observing someone's life. That being said, I do like the sentiment of the quote; our words will have more of an impact if our lives match what we say. But the bottom line is that our message *and* our actions are important.

I was once passed on 13th street by an angry driver who gave me the finger as he sped past. I couldn't help but to notice he had a Christian fish stuck to his trunk lid. Does our manner of life match our message? What if Noah would have preached judgment, but never built the ark? I don't think his message would have had as much of an impact on the world as it did when he put his faith into practice.

I often wonder if my life is making an impact on the world. Since I've come to work at this church the number of non-Christians I interact with on a weekly basis is miniscule. And my sanctification seems to be moving in slow motion. These two factors put together make me wonder about the impact my life is making. But while our individual lives are important I think we sometimes focus on our individual witness to the exclusion of our corporate witness. I also wonder what impact this church is making on the world. I heard once that one way to evaluate whether or not your church is making an impact on the community it is planted in is to ask two questions. First, if your church closed its doors tomorrow would the community even notice? Second, if your church closed its doors tomorrow would the community even care? These questions are not designed to be indictments, but I do think they are questions we should be asking regularly and taking before the Lord in prayer with all honesty.

David Platt is the pastor of The Church at Brookhills in Birmingham, AL. Maggie and I were able to hear him preach last weekend. I was blown away by a story he told. I would like to share it with you. In preparation for a sermon on James 1:27 Platt went to the agency that handles foster care in Birmingham County and asked how many families would be needed to have all of the foster kids in Birmingham County placed. The agency laughed at him and then told him that they would need 150 families.

⁴ O'Brien, pg. 408.

That Sunday he preached the sermon on James 1:27, which says, “*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*” During the sermon Platt told his congregation of the foster care need in the county and announced a meeting for all who were interested in responding to the need. Out of that meeting 160 families made the decision to become foster parents.

When Platt returned to the agency to give them the information a lady pulled him aside and said, “What did you say to them to cause them to come and serve?” Platt told her that he didn’t tell them to do this, they were simply responding to the Word of God out of love for God. That congregation took God at his Word and exercised faith that testifies. If Brookhills shut their doors tomorrow Birmingham would notice. If Brookhills shut their doors tomorrow Birmingham would definitely care.

Why do I tell you this story? It is not because I think we need to end the foster care needs of Sedgwick County single handedly, though I am thankful for those of you who are doing foster care. And it is not because I think Brookhills is a great church and First Free isn’t. I’m simply encouraged that God is using them to testify in Birmingham, and they motivate me to pray for God to use First Free in increasing measure to be a testimony of the great love of Christ in our community. We don’t need to imitate what other churches are doing, but we should imitate a faith that is eager to take God at his Word. I want the faith that is present in this church to be on display to the world, for the sake of God’s glory!

11:7c *[Noah] became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

I want to reiterate something I’ve already said. None of the three guys we’ve discussed this morning, nor any of the witnesses mentioned in chapter 11, get a medal for their good works. They have been commended by God and declared righteous through faith alone. The Gospel reminds us of this. For it tells us that God alone is holy and worthy of glory. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death. Because of our sin we all deserve the wrath of God and his eternal punishment. But for our sake, God gave his one and only Son Jesus to pay the price for our sin by dying on the cross. He also conquered the power of death by his resurrection. If we believe in Jesus and repent of our sin we are forgiven of our sin and declared righteous. Through faith in Jesus we have eternal life even now as we await our promised eternal inheritance.

In this church we share the Gospel almost every week. One of the reasons we share the Gospel each week is we desire for everyone to come into a saving relationship with God, through faith in Christ. But another reason we share the Gospel each week is it is easy for any one of us to forget that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. When I express a desire for each of us to live lives that bear witness to the Gospel I don’t want any of you to miss my point. Only God can justify us through Christ. And when God testifies on our behalf we are justified. We are justified through faith in Christ. But a faith that justifies will also testify and that is the emphasis in Hebrews 11.

Our faith will testify by our perseverance to the very end. It will testify by a life lived with our eyes fixed on our eternal inheritance. It will testify as people see a heart that is in love with God. It will testify long after we're gone if we've lived our lives by faith. It will testify if we're living in a growing relationship with God that is marked by time spent with him. It will testify if we're living our lives in reverent obedience to his Word. And it will testify if our lives are marked by a daily awareness that we are saved by faith and not by works. I pray that our church would testify to this faith in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, and in our community by the grace of God.

References

- Begg, Alistair. "Portrait of Faith, Part 1." Sermon, Fix Our Eyes on Jesus – Volume 3: A Study in Hebrews 11-13, December 1, 2007.
- Doriani, Dan. "Hebrews 10-13: The Life of Faith." Lecture notes, Hebrews to Revelation, Summer 2006.
- Duncan, Ligon. "The Faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah." Sermon, Hebrews, March 18, 1996.
- Lane, William. *Hebrews. 9-13*. Word Biblical Commentary, v. 47B. Dallas, Tex: Word Books, 1991.
- O'Brien, Peter. *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Pillar New Testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2010.
- Piper, John. "Without Faith it is Impossible to Please God" Sermon, Hebrews, June 8, 1997.
- Strathmann, H. "martyreo, martyres." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume 4*. ed. Kittel, Gerhard, Geoffrey Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1967.