

What Faith Is

Introduction. Hebrews 11 stands in Scripture as the great faith chapter. Although this chapter is primarily hortatory, still it fits logically into the argument of the whole Epistle. The first readers had their roots deep in history, and on that history the author bases his appeal. His appeal as it develops, however, gradually is transformed into an implicit argument: he points to men of faith in the old covenant that he may renew loyalty to the new. He uses what is precious and sacred to enforce the very lessons he has been seeking to get across -- his readers will best imitate the religion of their fathers not by falling back into Judaism but to holding on to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

In this great chapter on faith, faith is presented as the opposite of falling back, it is the staying power, it is the courageous spirit that enables a man to choose hardship and duty over ease and safety. Thus in the long chronicle of heroes given here, the author stresses three characteristics particularly in the lives of men and women of faith: their unfaltering trust in God, their vision of the invisible, and their power to press on in hope.

Before going into them, the author gives a definition of faith which we will consider in this lesson. The word "faith" occurs 245 times in the New Testament, but there is scarcely any verses of the New Testament more important than these, for they state what is the nature of all true faith, and is the only definition of it which is attempted in all the scriptures.

I. ***The Nature Of Faith***

A. The substance of things hoped for.

1. The word rendered "substance" occurs in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 9:4, 11:17, and Hebrews 3:14. The word here has reference to something which imparts reality in the view of the mind to those things which are not seen, and which serves to distinguish them from those things which are unreal and illusive. It is that which enables us to feel and act as if they were real, or which causes them to exert an influence over us as if we saw them.
2. We do not see God, or heaven, or the angels, or the redeemed in glory, or the crowns of victory, but we have faith in them, and this leads us to act as if we saw them. Under the influence of faith, man allows spiritual matters to control his mind as if he saw them, even though the world may consider those matters as unreal and impossible.

3. If we follow a God whose audible voice we have never heard and believe in a Christ whose face we have never seen, we do so because our faith has a reality, a substance, an assurance that is unshakable. In doing so, Jesus said, we are specially blessed (John 20:29). Faith provides the firm ground upon which we stand, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise.
- B. The evidence of things not seen.
1. The word rendered "evidence" appears in the New Testament only here and in 2 Timothy 3:16, where it is translated "reproof." It is used of cross-examining someone with a view to establishing evidence. As the eye proves facts in the visible world, so faith enables one to act with a view to facts in the higher, invisible realm.
 2. When a man who has never seen it believes that there is such a place as London, his belief in the testimonies respecting it which he has heard and read is, to his mind, a good and rational proof of its existence, and he would act on that belief without hesitation. In short, it gives men the power to stake their lives on unseen realities.
 3. We drink water out of a faucet with perfect confidence that it is safe. We eat food in a restaurant, confident that it is not contaminated. We willingly receive our pay in the form of a check or paper money -- neither of which has any intrinsic value at all. We accept them because of our faith in the person or the company or the government that issues them. We put our faith in a surgeon, and in medical science in general, though we may not have the least training, competence, or experience in medicine ourselves. We submit to the surgeon's knife entirely by faith. The capacity for faith is created within us.

II. ***The Testimony Of Faith***

- A. The translation "men of old" is preferred to "elders" since the author's reference is, of course, to the men of renown of whom he is about to speak. He speaks of the "fathers" who lived in past ages, from the time of Abel onward.
- B. These men, on account of their faith, received witness borne to them by God and stand immortalized in Scripture. Acting as they did under the influence of faith, in the circumstances in which they were, was the ground of the honorable testimony which was borne to them in the Old Testament.
- C. God is the only rational answer, the only sure answer. Only the God who made men can ever satisfy men. Only the God who made reason can make life reasonable. Only the God who made

the universe can show man any purpose in it. Since the time of Adam, some men have believed in God and believed what He has said. For them life has been meaningful; it has had assurance, substance, and confidence. They did not make a blind leap of faith, but put their faith in a future reality that, because of their faith, God made certain and sure for them. Believing in God gives reason for living -- and for dying. Stephen's glimpse of the Lord (Acts 7:55), vindicated all he had endured for the gospel's sake and all he was then about to suffer.

III. ***The Illustration Of Faith***

- A. About to relate in historical sequence the actions of faith-filled men and women, the author pauses and begins at the beginning. The Jews could not see His act of creating, but they could see His creation and they believed in the Creator. The existence of the world is a fact substantiated by experience, and that it has been "fashioned" or "created" in some inexplicable way is a natural deduction of the human mind.
- B. But that it has all come into being by the word of God is a theory unsupported by empirical evidence. The Genesis account attributes this to the action of God. God spoke and it was so (Psalm 33:6). Thus the conception, that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear, comes only through faith (Romans 1:20). It is because of faith and by means of faith that a true understanding of the created order is gained. Behind everything there is an unseen force that is simply not subject to the investigations of science.
- C. The origin of the universe has been a long-standing problem for philosophers and scientists. Centuries of investigation, speculation, and comparing of notes and theories have brought them no closer to a solution. Most philosophy is mere doodling with words, as many people do with a pencil. Without revelation, a source of basic truth, the best it can do is make verbal squiggles. Science has done no better than philosophy in offering answers to the origin of the universe. The nebula theory, the tidal theory, the steady-state theory, and finally the big bang (super dense) theory have all been dominant theories to explain the origin of the universe.
- D. Some of our natural world is discoverable with our eyes, ears, touch, and intellect. A great deal more of it, though, is not. It is apprehended only by faith, for which the Christian should make no apology. Faith comprehends that which the mind of man, no matter how brilliant, cannot fathom (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Conclusion. God's greatest truths are discovered by simple faith. It is not the world's way to truth, but a thousand years from now -- if the Lord tarries that long -- the world will still be devising and rejecting its theories. The person of faith knows the truth now. Faith is the only way to God (John 8:24).