

The Transforming Power of a Genuine Faith

Hebrews 11:1-7

What kind of life does God hold up for us to strive for? There are many visions of what the Christian life is supposed to be like. Some are strange, bizarre and unbiblical. Some call for sacrifice and suffering. Some mix both. How do we move through a text like Hebrews 11 with some sense of reality? You may remember that some Christians were imprisoned and the others made the hard decision to identify with them and risk their property and lives. Verse 34 tells what happened. "For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."

This is the kind of life the whole book of Hebrews is aiming to produce – a life that looks at the high cost of love (the seizure of our property, perhaps, or some kind of other calamity or abuse or price to be paid) and then, accepts that possibility *joyfully* and does what love demands, no matter what. That's the life Hebrews wants us to live. All the glorious truth we have seen about Christ –in all the ways Jesus is supreme, all this great truth that we have been reveling in is aimed at practically making us into this kind of people. People who will risk life and property to bring the love of God to others. People who do not look for comforts and ease and security as a necessary thing in life. People who are not driven by style and safety and wealth and leisure. People who know there is one life to live and only what's done to magnify Jesus in His Name and for the eternal good of others will count in the end.

The only way that such a life comes about is by an unshakable hope in God beyond this life. The power to be joyfully sacrificial in love for others is in knowing that you have a better and lasting possession. If you do not live by this great confidence, you will be continually thinking about how much you are losing out and how much it is costing you each time you sacrifice for others. But if you are living now to be prepared for eternity then you are free to risk your life and property and time and all that matters because the present sufferings are not even worthy to be compared to glory that is coming.

We have access to God and an advocate before God. Therefore, we are to come to God, cling to our hope and care for one another. We must do this because of the temptation of willful, deliberate sin and the testing of painful and costly suffering. In all of this we are to believe God and His very great and precious promises so that we persevere. We do not throw away our confidence in God. We hope for what He will bring. Thus, we are to live by faith as Habakkuk taught. We will not be a people who shrink back through sin or suffering, but rather are a people who keep on believing God.

Now the author is going to show us that this is not unusual or strange. All through redemptive history we have men and women who have clung to God in His promises and have persevered through enormous suffering. And every one of them did so through faith, through believing God even when it seemed like it was not coming to pass. This is meant to deepen your confidence in God's promises so that you turn from the passing pleasures of sin and live out a sacrificial love for the glory of Jesus and the good of others.

Chapter 11 begins with a description of faith that links it with hope and then shows us how this hope empowers obedience. There's the link. Faith is the essence and evidence that what we are straining for and cannot yet see is real. So here is a catalogue of people who illustrate this kind of faith, who lived and died in the assurance and confidence of glory and gladness to come.

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

It seems that this paragraph is supposed to be a natural bridge between 10:36, “for you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” We are supposed to travel across this bridge on three strong pillars.

Faith as Confidence

(v.1)

What is he saying here? First, I do not believe that this is meant to be a definition of faith. It is meant to describe how faith connects our future hope to our present sacrificial love. So what are we to make of this? If you want to know how difficult it is, just pick up older and now newer translations and see how they struggle with what is here. Our problem here is the words that get translated “assurance” and “conviction”. These words are very difficult to represent in English and the construction of this sentence is difficult.

First, faith is such a strong confidence in the person and promises of God that we put our hopes in who He is and what He says. The deep inner assurance that our hopes are well founded is a facet of faith. Where ever that assurance, that confidence is, there is faith.

Second, faith is a strong conviction that the invisible is real. This is why faith is the opposite of sight, “we walk by faith, not by sight.” We have a deep conviction that God and His promises are real, even when they are neither visible to us nor tangible to us. Where that conviction is, there is faith.

Faith has a sense of an active, confident affirmation that what is either future or spiritual is *real*. It has substance and life changing power because it is believed. What is future to us in the promises and what is invisible to us in God and His promises is seen by souls with the eyes of faith so that we can truly say, “These things are so.”

So, faith is believing God and His promises in such a way that what is evident in us is an assurance and conviction of the eternal and invisible. That should be enough to free us from the fears and greed and worldliness that destroys radical, risk-taking love. If we have a strong conviction that God will care for us and bring us to glory and fulfill all His promises to us forever then we will be free from self-indulgence and free for serving others.

And this is right where many of you are. You are caught in the knowing that you ought to be dying for one another. But you have a taste for passing pleasures. The price you have to pay for sacrificial serving is simply greater than you are willing to pay. What is it then that we are missing about this kind of faith?

One more thing seems to ring true with this sentence. You can represent these words with two other English words – essence and evidence. Faith has in it the essence of what we hope for and faith is evidence of the invisible. Now we are starting to fill in the colors of our picture. Faith believes God and trusts Him and understands so powerfully what God has promised that believing brings the glory and gladness that having will.

You know what it is like. I can come home from a long day and open the front door and O, my, Esther has been cooking. And I smell Brazilian rice and Cordon Bleu and biscuits fresh from the oven and what happens. My mouth waters. My senses are telling me that something good and wonderful is about to happen and I am so sure that I can already

taste it. In the smelling of the delicious meal is still the essence of what it will be like to actually sit down and eat it.

This is what faith does. Faith doesn't create what we hope for – that would be magic and occult. Faith is not bringing this into existence. And faith is not imagining what is not real as though it were true. That is wishful thinking and some so-called Christian groups are quite adept at it. What they talk about is not authentic faith. Real faith is based in Truth.

Faith is the spiritual seeing, apprehending or perceiving or tasting or sensing of the beauty and sweetness and preciousness and goodness of what God promises – especially the enjoyment of His Presence and perfections. It smells the biscuits in the oven and causes the mouth to water.

Faith as Commendation

(v.2)

Why is understanding this description of faith so important? Because the men of old were approved and commended by God for this sort of faith. This sort of faith transformed them into the people who lived and loved and served and died in Hebrews 11. They themselves became the surrounding cloud of witnesses that press us on to endure.

By faith the believers of old were commended. I am struck by what he says here - notice it is *by* faith and not *because of* faith. So here he is saying something that we need to get a hold of. The believers were commended, not because they exercised faith, but through faith itself. Faith is always both an organ of sight - it sees - and an conduit of grace - a channel, a wire, a pipe. How did believers in the Old Covenant know they were approved by God? By faith. Faith conveyed God's approval to their hearts so that their souls saw it, believed it. Because they both saw and received that commendation through faith, they were enabled to move forward with assurance and confidence even in the shadows and dimness of the Old Covenant.

It is clear then that if they were commended by faith, so are we in the New Covenant. We are aware of God's external approval and internal affirmation because we believe the Truth of God's Word. This inner "Yes" from God and in our souls is real when we by faith believe God and His promises. And when we have that by faith, we have an unshakable hope and confidence so that our lives are radically changed.

Faith as Comprehension

(v.3)

How do I know then that this faith is grounded in truth and not a feeling? Because that faith is how we understand what the Bible tells us. The author shows that it is by faith that we understand. That inner comprehension, that inner sense of the realities of real things is conveyed to us and apprehended in us by faith. But it is not a blind leap nor some mystical thing arising from nowhere - rather, it is an understanding of what the Bible says. Here, the Bible says that God created all that is made by His very own speaking. This is something we can only know from the Bible. Yet not everyone who reads or even knows the Bible, believes in an understanding way this truth. What is the difference between those who do and those who don't? The gift of faith by God. It is not because they are more intellectual or less sinful. It is sheer grace giving faith so that by it, we understand.

Further, faith helps draw conclusions from that understanding. Here, faith enables Divine logic. If God, who is invisible, made all the cosmos which is visible, then faith causes understanding to affirm that what is visible arises from the invisible. Now we are right back at verse one, are we not? Genuine faith is assured of and convinced by the Genesis record that God created everything. Since all that is seen was created by all that is unseen, then the

unseen is real. You must never equate unseen with unreal. That is doubt. Faith is unseen is real. So, God exists. God made. God promises. God describes what I cannot see and what I do not yet have and yet it is real and will come to pass.

And it is so real, that I sense its flavor, its smell, its taste, its sense right now. This all not because you dream it up or conjure it up by human effort or imagination or technique. But rather you read it in God's Word. You believe it because of God. Then what the Word of God speaks of is real—broken like sweet bread and poured out like refreshing water and the spiritual taste of your heart is awakened. All that God promises and gives you are experiencing now in a way that gives you confidence and assurance.

That is why Psalm 34:8 says;

O *taste* and *see* that the Lord is good;
How happy is the man who takes refuge in Him!

Reflect and Respond

There are two parts to faith in this verse, which shows why it pleases God. First, faith believes God exists. Second, faith believes that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Because faith is these two things, it pleases God. He doesn't say why this is so. He just says it is. There is something about the nature of God that makes this obvious.

Let me say this another way. What pleases God is when we show by our life that God *exists* and that He is *excellent*. Our believing obedience displays how *real* God is and how *rewarding* He is. God is like this: it brings Him pleasure when we trust Him and when we treasure Him.

Here for me is one of the most important lessons about faith. The nature of faith and the vitality of faith is rooted in what God is like, not in what we are like. Faith is what it is because of what and who God is. The more you know what God is like, the more conformed to His greatness will be your faith. Your trusting obedience will have in it the essence of God's promises and the evidence that He is real and He is rewarding.

May our worship have the fragrance of heaven and the life of sacrifice. May our walk with God fill Him with pleasure and delight. May our witness have a sense of authenticity and reality. May we live and die to wonderfully display that God is real and that He is rewarding.