

Session 1: The Nature of Faith

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Date: 30 August 2025

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[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. It is an absolute joy to be able to come and worship with you this evening and to spend some time with you getting to know you and to share with you from God's word.

So if you have a Bible, I do want you to keep it open to Hebrews 11. We are primarily looking at verses one through to three, but we'll also look a little bit at verse six.

Now, I'm going to do something here. I'm going to read my Bible off of my iPad simply because it's not fitting well on the on the rostrum and I don't want them to both fall off.

So I'll leave my Bible right there and we'll move forward. Now, over the next 36 hours or so, I'll be giving four talks. As you know, it's in the booklet out of Hebrews 11 and then the first few verses of Hebrews 12.

So this evening, our first message is mainly looking at verses one to three, but as I said, we'll also look a little bit at verse six. The topic that we will be considering is the nature of faith.

[1 : 14] In a well-known lecture in 1992 at the Edinburgh International Science Festival, the famed evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who many of us know, was asked to define faith.

Now, why would you ask Richard Dawkins to define faith? I'm not sure, but they did. And this is what he said. Faith is the great cop-out. It is the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence.

Faith is belief despite, even perhaps because of, a lack of evidence. Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument.

Now, is that your definition of faith? Whenever you think about your faith, is this what comes to mind? You might be surprised, but I think quite a few Christians would say, yes, that is my understanding of faith.

I just believe these things. I don't know why. It's just something I believe. Now, I hope that that's not your perspective, but a surprising number of people would say that that is their own.

[2 : 32] What I want us to consider this weekend, though, is what do the scriptures say about faith? Particularly, how do we see faith discussed in this chapter and then the first few verses of chapter 12?

Each of the four sessions will consider one aspect of faith. What I want us to see this evening is simply this, that faith is the God-given assurance of unseen realities that reorients our understanding of the world and is essential to pleasing God.

Let me say that again because I have a strong American accent. Faith is the God-given assurance of unseen realities that reorients our understanding of the world and is essential for pleasing God.

Now, this message will have three points that come from the text itself. The first point is the definition of faith. Faith. We see the definition of faith primarily in verse 1.

We will see that faith is both assurance and conviction. The second point this evening, we will look at the history of faith, and this comes primarily from verse 2.

[4 : 08] We will see that God's people of old were affirmed for their faith. And then the third point this evening is the foundation of faith, and this comes from verses 3 and then from verse 6.

We will see that faith is grounded in knowledge, direction, and desire. What I want us to see from this passage is that to please God, we must live by faith, trusting God's word about the unseen, depending on God's promises, and seeking God above all else.

Now, before we begin looking at chapter 11, I think that it's important to situate us within the book. Hebrews chapters 7 through to 9 showed how Jesus served as the greatest high priest.

His sacrifice and his priestly ministry exceeded all of them in the Old Testament. Hebrews 10 encouraged believers to hold firmly to what they confess about Jesus and not to step back into

unbelief.

Instead, they should live in Christian community, encouraging one another in faith, and drawing near to God by faith.

[5 : 39] And it is this context that leads directly into our passage this evening, which gives a framework for the type of faith that they are to use to draw near to God.

So let's consider our first point this evening, a definition of faith. We see this in verse 1. Let me read that to us again.

It says this, Now faith is confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see. I note this offers a framework for a definition of faith, because it is not comprehensive.

It doesn't say everything that we need to know about faith, but it does make some very important points. After all, we need to know what faith is, because as we look at chapter 11, the words by faith appear 19 times in just this chapter.

So it's important to have a grasp as to what the words mean. So what we see in verse 1 is that faith is both assurance and conviction.

[7 : 00] If you look at different translations, you will see that these two words are often used. Assurance and conviction.

The first of these two words, assurance, refers to the idea of substance, firmness, confidence, or even to a collection of documents that could establish ownership.

This is how strong the word assurance was in Jesus' time, and in the time of the New Testament. Hebrew scholar George Guthrie says that faith is a resolute confidence.

I am resolved and confident that this is true. This underlies the translation of assurance in some of our Bibles.

But the second of the two words is conviction. Now, in the NIV, the first word, confidence, and the second word, assurance, are the two words that I'm talking about here.

[8 : 13] In other translations, conviction is the word that is used as the second word. Conviction is similar to how we use the word today.

If I have a strong conviction about something, it is a vital certainty which impels me to stretch out my hand, as it were, and lay hold of some reality or truth that is out there.

I am convicted that this is true. In the case of Hebrews 11, it's this hope in this fixed reality, which we can't see with our physical eyes, but that we know to be true.

It's this certainty that a greater reality exists. God's hand is moving through all things. Spiritual powers are at work.

A heavenly realm exists. Some things are still in the future. And our limited perspectives can only access these realities by faith.

[9 : 32] But these words that are chosen to define our faith, assurance, conviction, confidence, they show us that faith is neither wishful thinking, nor is it blind.

The two words used by the author of Hebrews to define faith describe a different reality than the one Richard Dawkins claimed that people mean by faith.

Faith is not believing despite a lack of evidence. It's a resolute confidence. Faith is not blind. Faith is assurance and conviction based on truths which we know.

But faith also, it differs from wishful thinking. Think for a moment about investing in the stock market.

About a year ago, a friend told me to put some money into a particular company. At the time, this company was around 40 U.S. dollars per share. I investigated the company.

[10 : 47] I saw some of the innovative things they were doing, some of the major backers behind the company, and purchased some shares. Believe it or not, it's up 400% from where it was a year ago, right?

So I'm very thankful for my friend in this regard. But on the other end, a few years ago, I invested in another surefire winner.

My father, who had been a high-level exec, knew people in this company. It had lots of strong financial backing. And yet, after a series of surprise lawsuits, the company folded.

And those stocks are now totally worthless. Whenever I or you invest in the stock market, we hope for a good ROI.

But despite all of my research, despite all of my discussions about various companies, at the end of the day, I have neither assurance nor strong conviction that any company can even guarantee a

meager ROI.

[11:58] There are simply too many variables. Companies are affected by other companies, geopolitics, shipping lines, technological innovations, and countless other factors.

But our faith has both assurance and strong conviction because it's not based on something like a company with a thousand variables.

Our faith centers on God himself. The Bible says from beginning to end that God never changes.

The Bible says that his plan has never changed.

It says that his power cannot be stopped. His will cannot be manipulated. Therefore, whatever God says will come to pass must come to pass.

Unlike the stock market, where research can't guarantee outcomes, faith in God rests on his unchanging character and on his established and firm word.

[13:07] And that's why assurance and conviction, true assurance, is possible. Consider how other passages teach this truth.

You might look at Psalm 20, verse 7, a psalm which many of you probably know. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

Even today, some people have faith and power and military might, but these are no stable ground compared to the stability of trusting in the Lord.

Consider Psalm 52, verse 8. But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.

Faith in God provides rootedness, like a growing olive tree. This imagery depicts security for those who have faith in the Lord.

[14:18] Consider finally, my second daughter's favorite passage. Psalm 26, verse 4. Trust in the Lord forever. For the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

A permanent rock cannot be broken and will not pass away. It's firm. It's secure. And our faith finds such stability in the Lord because he does not change.

Because he is a permanent rock. Thus, the writer of Hebrews can confidently state that faith is assurance and conviction of things unseen and things for which we hope.

Now, this brief framework for faith provides the foundation for the writer's comment in the next verse. The second verse describes the history of faith.

Let's look at it again. It simply says, this is what the ancients were commended for. God's people received affirmation because of, on account of, for their faith.

[15:39] The verse simply states that God affirmed the faith of those Old Testament saints who lived in faith. In fact, this idea underlines the entire chapter.

It's going to go through many examples and say, by faith, this person did this. By faith, that person did that. Many examples will be given throughout the chapter.

You see, faith laid beneath all of the godly actions that we read about in the Old Testament. As was mentioned a few minutes ago, I serve as a pastor and as a lecturer in the Old Testament.

I annually teach Old Testament introduction at seminaries in KL and Penang. I have quite a few students who come into this course, Old Testament introduction, with a faulty understanding of salvation.

They believe, and they will say it, that salvation in the Old Testament came through works, but salvation in the New Testament comes through faith.

[16:51] Maybe you have struggled with this understanding as well. However, our faith, our Christian faith, teaches that salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And this has always been the case. This was true for Paul and Peter, but also true for Abraham and Elijah. In my Baptist tradition, one of the most influential confessions says this.

It says, quote, the justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers in the New Testament, end quote.

Salvation has always been by grace through faith in Christ alone. Evangelical Christians ground this truth in passages such as 2 Corinthians 1, verses 19 and 20, which say this.

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ was not yes and no, but in him it is always yes. For all the promises of God find their, what?

[18:12] Yes, in him. Each of the Old Testament promises to Abraham, Moses, David, and so on and so forth find their yes in Christ.

Salvation has always been given of grace alone, always accessed by faith alone and in the finished work of Christ alone, even if that faith only looked like promises of a future Messiah.

Old Testament saints were never saved because of the good works that they did. In fact, if any of us were accounted for based on the works that we have done, none of us would have hope of salvation, but God in his grace has saved many by his grace through faith.

Now Hebrews 11 will go on to give many examples of this point, particularly over the next two sessions tomorrow, we will look at the broad, at the two broad time periods that are highlighted in Hebrews 11.

The first comes from the time of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, but it will have a special focus on Abraham as we will see.

[19 : 43] The second comes from the time of Israel. From its founding under Moses until its downfall, various characters are named for their faith.

But as with the emphasis on Abraham in the first section, there is an emphasis on Moses' faith in the second section. These faithful examples will show us how Old Testament saints were not commended for their actions, for their works, but they were commended for their faith, which undergirded those actions.

Brothers and sisters, the Old Testament is not a works-based story. From the beginning of the Old Testament, God's people were always commanded to live in covenantal relationship with him.

That relationship always became because of God's gracious initiative. Both in the period of the patriarchs and throughout the period of national Israel, God's people did not do good works.

In fact, what we see is that they consistently rebelled against God and did not faithfully keep his covenant. God's people recounted their history during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, and they summarized it in Nehemiah chapter 9, verses 33 and 34.

[21 : 14] It says this, this is them praying to God, yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly.

Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them.

End quote. In every way and by everyone, Israel acted unfaithfully. Yet God in his great mercy did not abandon them and kept them in his covenant.

Throughout their centuries of disobedience, God kept sending prophets to encourage repentance and to give them more promises of a future Messiah.

brothers and sisters, the story of the Old Testament is not a works-based story, but it is a story of God's faithfulness to his promises and a salvation found only by grace through faith in a promised Christ.

[22 : 33] And so our next two messages will reinforce this point. But this evening, let's consider finally the foundation of our faith.

We see this in verses 3 and 6. Let me read those to us. Verse 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.

And then verse 6. And 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.

Faith is related to knowledge, delight, and direction. Let me explain what I mean here. Look at verses 3 and verse 6.

Notice the three verbs in these two verses. In my translation they are understand, please, and draw near.

[23 : 46] The first of these verbs, understand, which is found in verse 3, refers to knowledge in the sense of perceiving and grasping a truth.

For example, if I say the words red triangle, everybody thinking of a red triangle? Now, the red triangle that you are thinking of and that I am thinking of might be different, right?

It might be a different size. It might be, I don't know the words of math, but it might have equal distances of each line, or it might be acute, at an acute angle, or an obtuse angle, or all these different words that I don't remember, right?

But we all know what a red triangle is. It's a truth that we can all grasp with our mind. We're able to understand, perceive, and grasp the truth of those words.

The second of the three verbs, please, is used in verse six. This refers to acting or being in any way that brings pleasure to someone or something else.

[25 : 06] It can refer to delight in the sense of doing something that inspires delight in the other. Finally, the third of these three verbs, draw near, or approach, appears in verse six.

It simply means to approach in the sense of directing oneself toward someone or something else. Each of these have something to say about our faith.

You see, faith relates to knowledge in the sense that our faith has a content. To have faith in something requires that something to, well, be something. something. You have to have faith in something. Faith apart from any object of faith simply doesn't make sense. There must be some truth or some person in which someone places their faith. This requires a knowledge of this truth or of this person. One must perceive it, understand it, and place one's assurance and confidence in it.

[26 : 26] Now, if you look again at verse 3, one must understand that God created all things by his word. The invisible words of God spoken from the invisible God created the visible world that we see.

knowledge of this truth, these truths, who God is, what he has done, how we relate to him, and so on and so forth, form the content of our faith.

This is what we understand. But faith relates to delight in that biblical faith produces delight in God. God when verse 6 states that without faith it is impossible to please God, this implies that faith pleases God.

God delights in our faith. Thus, faith conveys a type of relational knowledge between a subject and an object where one receives pleasure from the faith of the other.

[27 : 46] This also implies that one seeks or one desires to bring delight to God.

You see, we should not think about faith as built merely on knowledge of information. What I mean is this, it's possible for someone to have lots of information, even lots of information that they believe to be true, and yet still not have faith.

I'm reminded of a debate that I did about 20 years ago online with an atheist. This was a formalized written debate where we had the opportunity to write a series of arguments.

We had a word count and so on and so forth, and we would write an argument, then we would write a rebuttal, and back and forth for a set number of back and forths, until the debate concluded.

After a back and forth discussing much evidence for Jesus' resurrection, my debate opponent concluded this way.

[29 : 01] Jesus probably did exist and probably rose from the dead, and someday science will explain how he did it.

So I won the debate, right? Because I proved to this guy that Jesus rose from the dead, but I lost the debate because he only believed this information to be a fact about reality, but he didn't delight to know the true God.

God. You see, faith includes a desire for God to delight in you, and without faith, God will not delight in us.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Finally, in the third verb, draw near, shows us that faith relates to direction in that faith draws near to God.

As I stated previously, I mean, to draw near simply means to move in the direction of someone or something. In faith, one must move toward God.

[30 : 24] One cannot stumble upon God while they are moving toward an idol. you must draw near to God because faith understands the actions of God and draws near to the living God who delights in our faith.

And so to put these together, faith includes knowledge, delight, and direction. And so growing in faith means growing in knowledge, delight, and direction.

Growing in faith is not a matter of simply doing more things, although it certainly will lead to obedience. Growing in faith means aligning ourselves increasingly with God and moving in his direction.

This is how we draw near. We do so through the ordinary means of grace explained in God's word. We align our hearts with the Lord through directing ourselves to him in prayer.

We align our lives with the Lord through gathering with other believers as we've done tonight, worshiping with songs that teach us gospel truths, taking the Lord's supper together, confessing our sins one to another, forgiving one showing grace to one another, drawing near to God in these ways grows faith in us.

[32 : 07] But we also grow in faith through growing in our understanding of God and his ways. We do this through growing by reading regularly God's word, listening to good sermons, sitting under good teaching, reading good books, attending good classes that faithfully uphold God and teach truths that God has revealed.

And finally, we grow in our faith as we grow in our pursuit of God's delight. We can please God through our faith.

thus as we grow in faith and as a result thus as we grow in faith as a result we grow in God's delight.

But I would contend that we grow in faith because of growing in God's delight. The Bible says taste and see that the Lord is good.

The more that we taste and the more that we see the good ways of the Lord the more we delight in him and experience his delight in us.

[33 : 29] We satisfy ourselves in the delight and joy of God and this builds our faith. There is nothing I mean nothing more satisfying than knowing that God delights in us.

Just think about that for a moment. our faith brings pleasure and delight to God. And so these build upon each other. Faith leads to God's delight and God's delight leads to increasing faith.

And so if we put together everything from this evening session we are left with a simple application. Come to God by faith.

What we have seen clearly in this passage is that to please God we must live by faith trusting God's word about the unseen depending on God's promises and seeking God above all else.

We've discussed how faith is assurance and conviction. We have discussed how Old Testament saints were commended for their faith and we'll continue to discuss this in the two sessions tomorrow.

[34 : 53] We have discussed how faith entails knowledge delight and direction but if we put all of these things together the encouragement of this passage is that we should draw near to God by faith.

So why don't you do that this evening and each day for the rest of our lives. What does this mean tonight?

Well, come to God in faith. Trust in his word. Trust in his promises. Seek him above everything else because without faith it is impossible to please God and with faith he delights in you.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you for your word that we've been able to read in this first session this evening. I thank you that you remind us in this passage about the definition of faith.

I thank you that because you are a God who never changes we can have confident assurance in you. I thank you in that since you are a God who upholds your promises that we can trust and know that they will come true.

[36 : 19] And Father, I thank you that faith pleases you. And so I pray that we will be people that are pleasing to you. people who draw near to you in faith not based on our own works or our own righteousness or anything that we think deserves your delight but simply by our faith humbly admitting that apart from you we can do nothing but in you all things are possible.

So let us draw near to you this evening and for the rest of this camp and even as we leave from this place in a few days in Jesus name we pray amen