

# What Faith Does

*Hebrews 11:1–6*

October 9, 2022

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## The Hall of Fame of Faith

We come this morning to Hebrews chapter 11, one of the great chapters of the Bible. It is often called the Hall of Fame of Faith — and rightly so. In this chapter, eighteen different names from the Old Testament are mentioned, and for eleven of those people, their faith is held up as an example. It is a wonderful survey of Scripture and a genuine encouragement to us.

That encouragement to persevere and endure by faith is exactly the point of this chapter — it is why it exists in the book of Hebrews at all. Chapter 10 closes with the author, once again, calling his listeners to endure:

“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.” (*Hebrews 10:36*)

“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” (*Hebrews 10:39*)

And that is exactly where Hebrews 11 begins. In a few weeks we will see that when we arrive at chapter 12, we are right back into the theme of persevering and enduring. The purpose of chapter 11 — this chapter all about faith — is to encourage you and me in our own faith.

The way the author encourages us toward a life of faith is to describe what faith *does*. Or to put it another way: he describes for us the *work* of faith. And I recognize that for many people here today, that may be a new way of thinking about it.

Normally, when people talk about the work of faith, they do so with reference to either James 2:26 — where we are told that faith without works is dead — or Ephesians 2:8–10 — where we learn that we are saved by grace through faith for good works. In that usage, the work of faith refers to those things you do not in order to *get* saved, but *because* you are saved. It describes a life that follows Jesus.

That is not what I am talking about today.

Today, when I speak of the work of faith, I am not talking about what you need to do *because* of your faith. That is not what this chapter is about. Rather, this chapter is about what faith

does *in* you, *for* you, *to* you, and *through* you. The work I am describing is not the work you do — it is the work that faith itself does in, to, and for you.

And that is precisely why this chapter is such an encouragement to live by faith. The author is not piling on us all the things we are failing to do. He is not holding up Old Testament heroes as a way to show how lame we all are. He is doing just the opposite — he is showing what faith does in very common, ordinary people like you and me.

Think of it this way. If someone told you they traveled from Huntington to Charleston in two hours, you would probably think, *I'm glad I wasn't driving behind you* — nothing remarkable there. But then they added: *on a bicycle*. Suddenly two hours to Charleston is extraordinary. That person has gone, in your mind, from unremarkable to amazing. We tend to think of the Old Testament heroes that way — as if they were extraordinary people who did extraordinary things. When in reality they were just like you and me. What was remarkable about them was their faith. A faith that worked in them, to them, and for them.

And our faith is of equal standing with theirs. I am quoting Scripture when I say that. The Apostle Peter writes to those “*who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours*” (2 Peter 1:1). Faith works. Faith does amazing things. And the purpose of Hebrews 11 is to describe that work.

I also want to note that this is a different *way* of talking about faith than we are accustomed to. When theologians define faith — and the best definition I have ever encountered came out of the Reformation — they typically identify three elements: *knowledge*, *acceptance*, and *trust*. Faith is belief in something, so some knowledge is required. But faith is more than knowing — it is acceptance that what is known is true. And finally, for faith to be genuine faith, what is known and accepted must be lived; trust is the active, embodied expression of what one knows and has embraced.

Knowledge, acceptance, and trust — that is an excellent theological definition of faith. But that is not what the author of Hebrews 11 is doing. He is not defining faith according to systematic theology. He is defining faith by *what it does*. He is describing faith functionally, by its effects. If we miss this, we will miss the point of everything he says.

The author does the exact same thing with Scripture elsewhere in this letter. Over in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul defines Scripture analytically:

“*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*”

The writer of Hebrews, by contrast, defines Scripture by what it does:

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:12–13)

That is what Scripture *does*. And I suspect that description does far more to encourage you to read your Bible than any formal definition could.

In Hebrews 11, he is doing exactly the same thing with faith. He is not giving us a theological framework — he is showing us what faith does. And faith, he tells us, does three things. These three things are summarized in the opening three verses of the chapter. Let us walk through them.

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## What Faith Does: Three Movements

### One — Faith Receives the Grace of God

The first work of faith is this: it is *by* faith that you receive the grace of God. Faith is the means by which we receive all of God’s good gifts — and I am using the word *grace* here in its broadest sense, not limited to personal salvation but encompassing everything God gives, everything God does. We receive these things by faith. This is the point of verse 1:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”  
(Hebrews 11:1, ESV)

Now, I know that translation can make it sound as though faith is a work I must perform, rather than a work being performed in me. And yes, analytically speaking, faith *is* assurance and conviction in the things of God — that maps onto our knowledge, acceptance, and trust. But I do not think that is precisely what the author is saying here.

To give you a sense of just how complex this single verse is, consider how differently it has been rendered across the centuries:

The Wycliffe Bible of 1382 reads: “*But feith is the substaunce of thingis that ben to be hupid, and an argument of thingis not apperynge.*”

Tyndale’s Bible of 1526: “*Fayth is a sure confidence of thynges which are hoped for and a certayntie of thynges which are not sene.*”

The Geneva Bible of 1576: *“Nowe faith is the ground of things, which are hoped for, and the euidence of things which are not seene.”*

The King James Version of 1611: *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the euidence of things not seen.”*

The NIV: *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”*

The New Living Translation: *“Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the euidence of things we cannot see.”*

The ESV: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

The Holman Christian Standard Bible: *“Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.”*

I have chosen these translations to show you the spectrum of how this verse has been understood. The word rendered “assurance” in the ESV carries a weight that goes beyond simply having a strong conviction about something.

In terms of a word-for-word rendering of the Greek, I would give the prize to the Geneva Bible: *“faith is the ground of things hoped for.”* But what does it mean for faith to be the *ground* of things hoped for? The ground is substance. The ground is something tangible and real — it is land you can stand on. And so I think the King James and the Wycliffe Bible are getting at something essential: *faith is the substance of things hoped for.*

This is a way of saying that faith is the means by which we tangibly receive today what God has promised for the future. And what has God promised? What is the hope being spoken of here? We know the answer — we have been hearing about it all through Hebrews. It is who Jesus is and what he has done for us. It is by faith that we enter the holy of holies. It is by faith that we receive the forgiveness of sins. It is by faith that the future promises of God begin leaking into our lives today. This is what faith does *for* us: it gives us the person and work of Christ — the substance of God’s promises — even as we wait for their ultimate fulfillment.

And if someone asks, *How do I know those future promises are real? What euidence can you offer?* — the answer the author gives is striking: faith itself is the euidence. The peace you have in the middle of life’s storms, the freedom you know in Christ, the joy that surfaces in unexpected places — these are the euidences of things not yet seen.

This is the first work of faith: *by faith, you receive the grace of God.*

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## Two — Faith Transforms Your Life Into a Life That Pleases God

The second work of faith is described in verse 2:

“For by it the people of old received their commendation.” (Hebrews 11:2)

What is a commendation? It is a good report. It is a *well done*. It is a word that describes something — or someone — that is pleasing to God. The work of faith *in* you is that it transforms your life into a life that pleases God.

I want to come back to this point in a moment, but first let me move to the third movement, and then we will return.

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## Three — Faith Reveals God’s Presence, Work, and Purposes in This World

“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.” (Hebrews 11:3)

Again, I am reading this not as a demand placed upon me, but as something faith accomplishes *in* me. What does it accomplish? It gives me understanding of God’s work in this world. By faith I understand that the universe was created by the word of God — that by the sheer power of his speech, things that were not became things that are. Things unseen became visible. It is faith that opens this understanding to me.

This is what Augustine was reaching for when he wrote: “*I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand.*” Faith opens the mind, opens the eyes, opens the heart to God’s work, his presence, and his purposes in this world. We will come back to this third movement in a couple of weeks.

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Before returning to point two, I want to give you a brief illustration of the difference between the first and third movements of faith, drawn from the book of Revelation.

Near the end of Revelation 3, in the letter to the church at Laodicea, we have a well-known image of Jesus standing at the door of the heart, knocking:

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20)

This image captures the third work of faith. God has entered our world. He is at work all around you, every single day. He is always knocking, always inviting you to join him in what he is doing, always seeking to enter more deeply into your life. God has invaded our world through Christ, in the Spirit — and it is by faith that we see, understand, and hear that knock.

Now read just three verses further, and you find a second image — not of God invading your life, but of God inviting you into his:

“After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.” (Revelation 4:1–2)

This is the first work of faith. Faith ushers us into the very throne room of God. It brings us into his presence. By faith we are not left standing outside the door — we are drawn in.

These two images together — the Lord knocking at your door, and you standing before the throne of God — are both images of what faith does. It is by faith that we witness God at work in our world, and it is by faith that we enter God’s world and draw near to him.

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## Faith Transforms What We Do and Who We Are

Now let us return to the second movement: *faith transforms your life into a life that pleases God*. This is where the text takes us next.

“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.” (Hebrews 11:4)

“By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.” (Hebrews 11:5)

Notice how both of these examples focus on faith that *pleases* God. And verse 6 summarizes them:

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

In both cases — Abel and Enoch — we have lives that were transformed by faith into lives that pleased God. Let us look at each.

In Genesis 4, two brothers bring offerings and sacrifices to God. The Lord accepted Abel's and rejected Cain's. Why? Some suggest it was a matter of *what* they brought — that Cain brought vegetables and Abel brought meat. That actually makes intuitive sense to me, and I cannot say I blame God. But that is not what the author of Hebrews says. Abel's offering was acceptable to God because of his *faith*. It was faith that transformed what Abel offered into something that pleased God.

I want to press on this point, because it is easy to read the first half of verse 4 as saying that faith caused Abel to know the right kind of sacrifice to bring — to do the right thing. That is quite likely true. But it is not the author's point. His point is that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable not primarily because of *what* he brought, but because of the *faith* in which he brought it. It was faith that transformed the act into something pleasing to God.

The second half of verse 4 reinforces this. God showed Abel that he was pleased — pleased with his faith — by accepting his offering. Did God ask for the offering? Not explicitly. Does God need Abel's offering? Of course not. But he accepted it as a gesture of delight in Abel's faith. And notice the reach of it: faith transformed not only what Abel *did*, but Abel *himself* — so that though he died, he still speaks. His faith transcends his death.

This carries us directly into the example of Enoch. Because the faith of Enoch pleased God, God transformed his entire existence to the point that he did not taste death at all. Faith worked *in* Enoch so thoroughly that it changed the very shape of his life — and his death.

*Faith transforms your life into a life that pleases God.*

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## **Applying the Work of Faith**

So what does this mean for us? What does God want of you? What does God want you to *do*?

Many Christians stress and worry and fret over whether what they are doing is pleasing to God or not. Is what I am eating acceptable? What I am watching? Listening to? Is using social media acceptable to God? Is my job acceptable? The vacation I am taking? The restaurant I am eating at?

Let me answer clearly: if something leads you into sin, it is not acceptable to God. If something leads others into sin, it is not acceptable to God. There are clear guardrails. But between those guardrails, there is a great deal of road to travel on. And the question of what lane God wants you in — well, what God wants of you is *faith*. It is by faith that what you do is transformed

into something that pleases him. It is by faith that the job you hold, the hobby you enjoy, the ordinary days you live — are made pleasing to God.

This is the work of faith: it creates in us a God-pleasing life.

So what does this life-transforming faith look like in practice? Paul gives us a stunning picture of it in 1 Corinthians 10. Listen to how a faith that pleases God actually lives in this world — and how it transforms what we do and who we are:

*“All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience — I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience?” (1 Corinthians 10:23–29)*

Paul’s point is that there is a great deal of road between the guardrails. There is such a thing as Christian liberty. We are free to enjoy this life without worrying over every last detail of whether it meets God’s approval. We are not to be chained by legalism. We are to live by faith. And it is living by faith that what we do and the lives we live are transformed into ones that please God.

And what does that faith look like? The next verses show us.

*“If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?” (v. 30)*

A faith that pleases God is a faith that *gives thanks*. When you are doing something — anything — stop and give thanks to God for it. It is in that gratitude that what we do is made pleasing to him.

*“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (v. 31)*

A faith that pleases God is a faith that does everything to God’s glory. Whatever you are doing, do it in such a way that not only is thanks given to God, but that God is proclaimed and seen — in your life, in this world.

*“Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.” (vv. 32–33)*

A faith that pleases God is a faith that seeks the good of others — a faith oriented outward, drawing people toward the Lord.

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## **Closing**

Faith works. It works in you, to you, and for you.

By faith, you receive the grace of God — the person and work of Christ made tangible in your life today, even as you await the fullness of what is promised.

By faith, God’s presence, work, and purposes in this world are opened to your understanding — you begin to hear the knock, to see the open door.

And by faith, your life is transformed into a life that pleases God — not through straining and striving, but through the quiet, powerful work that faith does in the most ordinary moments of our days.

Go forth today as people of faith.