

The Nature of Faith

By Faith: Pt.1

We are going to spend all of the summer examining one particular chapter of one particular book of this Bible. Towards the end of the New Testament you arrive at the book of Hebrews. Nobody knows who wrote it – the mystery is part of its enduring charm. And yet without doubt it had a major impact on many of the teachings of the early church Fathers and councils. It played a key role in the arguments for the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

But that's not going to be our focus this summer. We're just going to be looking at one chapter; the eleventh chapter. And the entire chapter is on *faith*. What does it mean to have faith in God? And in Jesus Christ? It looks at faith in every possible aspect, and it's considered, in many ways, *the* classic text, the best single spot in the entire Bible on the nature of faith.

What is faith? What is it made of? How do you know if you have it? How do you lose it? How do you get it back? How does it grow? How does it wane? All of these things are dealt with not only in some general statements, which we're going to look at for the first few weeks, but best of all, through specific personal case studies - literally dozens of them - of men and

women and how *they* developed and how they wrestled with the issues that have to do with faith.

Now right off the bat, I think it's always important if you're going to invest your precious time here on Sunday mornings, for me to answer the question that might come up... "Why do I need to know about this? Faith is kind of interesting, I guess. A good theology lesson, I suppose." Maybe somebody says, "Well, I have faith. I guess I've always had faith. But I've got practical matters I'm facing. How is this going to help me in my day-to-day life?"

Now – there's certainly more to life than pragmatism – but that's a valid question. And I want to assure you from the start that there is nothing more practical than faith. I read in the newspaper this week about a church shooting in Alabama – it's gotten lost in the wake of Uvalde, but it had its own sort of tragedy. During a church supper last Thursday at St. Stephen's Episcopal, a stranger came in and sat at a table all by himself. Several people came over repeatedly to invite him to sit with them, or to offer to fix him a plate. Instead, he pulled out a gun and murdered three people.

During his sermon last Sunday, Pastor John Burress compared the incident to the Last Supper in which Jesus included Judas, knowing he would betray him. He talked about loving broken people so much that it might cost your life. It did for these three members of his congregation. Then he said, “There is no doubt in my mind that [the three victims] would invite their Judas again, and again, and again to their table... We trust in the *unfailing faith* of Bart and Jane and Sharon.”

I marvel at that. It's not that there will not be grief and sorrow, even anger and justice, but this church realizes it is *faith* that will enable them to endure this tragedy, just as it was faith that enabled their loved ones to choose love over fear no matter what it cost them. So you see, when you look at faith even in the most pragmatic way, you have to say it would be great to have something like that that could enable you to face what I would consider “the ultimate.”

If you have a faith that can face *that*, you can face the price of gas or what's going on with your marriage or your health. So this isn't just a seminary lecture. It's a tremendously practical issue. What is faith then? I want to give you an overview. In many ways, today is an introduction to our whole Summer. So let me start off by just reading you the opening few verses. You'll about have this memorized by the first high school football game, but let's get a start on it.

Hebrews chapter 11, I'm going to read **verses 1–6**.
1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2 This 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. 4 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. 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. 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.

Now, I want to show you that faith has three layers to it. Think of it like a lasagna; you've got the noodle layer and the meat layer and the cheese layer. They build on one another, but they also blend with one another. Now the reality is it's a bit more complex than that. But I would still suggest that we understand faith as three layers.

And I would like to give you a look at how the three all work together first - give you an overview - and then give you an *introduction* to what each of the three are. When Martin Luther spoke about it, he gave them Latin names: *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*. We are not going to do that because that *would* be a seminary lecture. Instead, I'm going to say to you faith has three aspects, and you can understand it this way.

Faith begins with **understanding**, which leads to **conviction**, but completes itself in **commitment**. It begins with understanding. It leads to conviction but always completes itself in commitment. Understanding, conviction, commitment. Let me show you how that works. And this is important, because the *process* of faith development - one of these things layered on the next, layered on the next - is absolutely necessary to live. This is part of that practicality.

There is essentially *no* demonstrable proof of anything except mathematical equations - and some of you higher math people may want to question me on even *that*. But therefore, everything we *do*, everything we *know*, everything we *learn* actually is, I hope to show you, the result of a faith-development process. I'm not saying everything is unknowable. I'm just saying everything you can know - except *maybe* mathematical equations - involves a faith-development process.

Faith development is the way in which we do anything. Let me show you how it works in very practical ways. If you know you have to have surgery, how do you go about finding a surgeon? How do you choose a spouse? How do you find an auto mechanic for your car? How do you hire a new key member to your team? How do you do those things?

Essentially, they're all the same. Here's what happens. Say you know you have to have surgery. You're going to find a doctor. First of all, there's a rational process. You get recommendations from people you trust. You get opinions. You get references. You sift through the evidence. You sort out competing claims, and you decide, "Which is the best doctor for me in this situation?" In other words, it's a *rational* process. There's *reasoning* that goes on. You don't just *leap* to a conclusion. You *think* about it. That's first.

But then secondly, if you *truly* come to understanding, there's a point in which you have to swallow hard and make a decision. If you go on through the process that this is the right doctor, at a certain point you have to decide, "This is the right doctor *for me*." There has to be a decision. But what we like about mathematics, and what we hate about faith development, is at that point in the process - you've reasoned, you've taken all the references, you've thought it out, you have lots and lots of evidence this is the doctor, this is the best person, this is the one to go to and you make a decision - you can only do that on the basis of probability. You *can't* know for sure yet.

Faith hasn't completed itself until you move through that decision into commitment. What do I mean by that? You have to make yourself vulnerable. You lay yourself out on the table. You're basically getting naked and letting a room full of strangers drug you into unconsciousness. That's commitment! You made a decision on the basis of reason, but it was just probability. You couldn't know *for sure* until you made yourself vulnerable to that person.

After you've done that and you've rested in that decision and you've lived out of that decision and you actually put yourself in the hands of the doctor, put yourself in the hands of the mechanic, put yourself in the hands of your fiancée and actually marry, only after you've done that can you ever be *certain* if the person is trustworthy.

Then as time goes on, the certainty grows. And you start to recommend that person to others – “This surgeon is really great. I *trust* them.” And that's the way it works. You understand, you reason to probability, but then you decide and you commit to certainty. And faith only completes itself in certainty.

So do you see what's happened? You reason...but you can never *know* anything simply through reason. You reason, and then you have to commit. You have to *live* out of it. You have to *rest* in it.

You have to *stick* to it. You have to *follow through*...and then you come to certainty. That is the way in which people make decisions. We may wish it wasn't. We would like to think simple reasoning can get you to certainty. It doesn't work that way.

This is the reason why some people never get married, because they want to reason to certainty and *then* make the commitment. They want to be *absolutely* sure. They don't want to reason to probability and then commit to certainty. They don't want to admit there's no way to know *anything* except through faith and that faith has those three aspects: understanding, conviction, and then finally commitment.

Now as I said, I'm going to move on and explain the details of the parts, but for a minute, let me stop and make my first practical application point. The first practical application point is do not try to get out from under your responsibility to believe in God and in Jesus Christ by thinking of faith as a talent. That's not how faith development works, and you can't get around in life without faith development. You're using faith all the time. You're putting your faith in things all the time. We've already demonstrated that if you have a doctor, a mechanic, a spouse, you have been through a faith building process.

Everything from the little things like a mechanic for your car to the big things like how you decide on your career and how you decide on a spouse, to the very big things like how you decide what's right and wrong and how you decide what your meaning in life is and what you're going to live for. *All* of those things are faith processes.

You see, it's pretty typical to encounter people who say, "Oh, you have faith. How nice. That's just not me." In other words, you can look at people with faith in Christ, and you look at them the way an unmusical person looks at the great musician or an unathletic person looks at the great athlete. You say, "I wish I could hit a ball like that. That would be nice." Or "It would be *nice* if I could sing like that. That's just not me. It would be nice if I could have faith in Jesus Christ. That's just not me."

This is an utterly mistaken way to look at it. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not that Christians have faith and non-Christians don't. The difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not whether you have faith but *where you put the faith you have*; what you're building your life on. The Bible does not call to the skeptics and say, "Oh, you hard-nosed skeptical people who don't live life with faith but only on the basis of reasoning. Ah, yes. Make the leap. Just make this great leap of faith and believe in Jesus."

No, that's not what it says. What it says is there's instability and unhappiness in your life, and do you know why? It's because you have *already* put your faith in inadequate objects. Do you know what a bomb is? A bomb is something with an unstable compound in the center, and that's why it blows up. Do you want to know why you're anxious and unhappy? Something is inside you which is unstable.

Do you know what that unstable compound is? How you decide where you get your meaning in life. How you decide what the most important things to live for are. How you decide what is right and wrong. How you determine your identity – who is the "real you"? You've *already put* your faith - because you can't prove these things - on things which are inadequate. A pyramid upside down is *very* unstable. And for you to try to build the fullness of your life on the things you are *already believing in* creates that instability. You're a bomb. If you haven't already gone off, you will. See?

So the Bible doesn't say, "Oh, you poor people without faith. Believe. Just take the leap. Take the flying leap and believe in Jesus." It says, "Don't you dare get out from under your responsibility to believe by saying you don't believe. You *do*." It's *where* you believe. It's *what* you're believing in. That's the point.

Now let me just give you an introduction, not of how these three things interrelate, but of how in terms of faith in Christ what each one of these things really is. And it's going to be an introduction, because the beauty of a series is we're going to get back to each of these aspects several times in the next few weeks. This first one will be brief. Next week actually this is the one we'll open up, so if you feel like I don't give it adequate treatment, you're right. It comes back next week. First of all, faith is **Understanding.**

See what the text says? **Verse 3** says "*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.*" See, the physical was actually brought into existence by the unphysical, by the immaterial, by the supernatural, by God Himself. Now do you know what that word "understand" means? It's simply the old Greek word *noéo*. It means "to perceive with the mind". It has to do with thinking. It has to do with reasoning.

When it says "understand", it means by faith we "conclude from the evidence." That's what it says. Now you say, "What does that mean?" Well, it means at one level the foundation of faith for theology is the same as that for science. You know scientific theories are not established strictly by induction. But when a scientist notices, for example, that particles react in a certain way, what the scientists do to figure out why is they posit a theory.

This is the scientific method. In other words, they start with a premise. They say, "Let's start *assuming* that this is the case. Does this explain the phenomenon? Let's test out the theory." In other words, they start with faith. That's how scientists understand anything. They take a theory, they take a *premise* - something that hasn't been proven, that's the idea - and they say, "Does this account for what we see? Does this make it coherent? Does this lead us to expect what actually is happening?"

In other words, *by faith* is the way we understand anything scientifically. You start with a premise. You start with a faith spot, and then you say, "Does this help us understand?" Then you test it, and the theory that *best* explains what's out there becomes the reigning theory. How do we decide where the universe came from and where life came from? The same way. Everybody who has ever addressed the question, "Where did life come from? How did organic life happen? How did the universe happen?" starts with a premise.

The premise is not something you can prove to *start* with. The proof is in the process. You either say, "Well, let's start with a premise that there is no supernatural." You can't prove that. Nobody can prove that. That's an assumption. Now if you start with that as a premise and say, "Does that make sense in the universe?" that is a way to try to justify the theory. That's *a* way to understand the universe, and that's the way many secular intellectuals look at the universe now. That's the reigning theory.

But here's what a Christian is, and this is what the text is telling us. Christians are people who decide that from the premise of "no God", the universe is *not* understandable. It's not coherent. It doesn't account for what's there. And the only rational and reasonable way to account for what we see is by starting with the faith premise that there's a God who created it.

Now we'll look at that next week, but I want you to see that when it says, "*By faith we understand...*" it doesn't mean, "Oh here are the intellectual people who look at the universe without faith, and here are ignorant Christians who look at the universe with faith. In spite of the evidence, I believe God created everything." That is not Christianity.

And if you say you have faith and what you mean by that is, "Because my parents raised me this way, I believe God created the universe in spite of the fact that all of the evidence is to the contrary," that's not faith at all. That's not faith. That's brainwashing. That's propaganda. That's anti-intellectual, and that's not faith.

I'll just really briefly put it to you this way. A Christian is somebody who looks at the universe and thinks like this; A Christian looks and says, "Okay, if there is no God, then there's less mathematical chance of organic life just springing out of inorganic life than there is a chance that an explosion in a paint factory would produce the Mona Lisa." Now that's true. So Christians look at the world and say, "Does that premise that there is no God really make sense of what I see? No!"

Or another way. A Christian says, "If there is no God, that means everything is an accident. And even though all human beings universally believe, for example, genocide is morally wrong, there's no basis for that. It's not true. Though all human beings deeply believe there's a difference between violence and compassion, that's not true. It's all random. It's all chemical. It's all molecules." Does *that* make sense ethically?

A Christian says, "If there is no God, does that premise make sense of what we know and what we see? No!" A Christian is not somebody who says, "I believe against the evidence." The Christian is one who says, "Unless I believe in God, what I see out there does not make sense." There's *reasoning*. There's *rationality*. That's how faith *has* to begin.

Let me make my second practical point before we move on. This means when the Bible calls you to believe, it calls you to start thinking, in many cases - let me say this respectfully - for the *first* time. Most people *do not* disbelieve out of thinking. They disbelieve because it's not popular. It's not relevant. It's not cool. It's not hip. It's not in. That's emotion. I'll put it to you this way. Christians are people who usually, in many cases, become Christians because they've been *forced* to think.

It is anti-intellectual to say what I often get from people. And maybe somebody is thinking this out there right now. You say, "You know, I'm in pain. I have a hard life. I came to church today hoping I would get something practical to know how to deal with the hard life I have, how to make these hard choices, how to deal with this awful relationship. I need some strength. I need some inspiration. I need something practical, not arguments for the existence of God."

And here's what Christianity says: "Okay, you're in pain, but let me ask you a question. How in the world do you think you're going to make a decision about how to make these decisions in life unless first you decide whether you're an accident or whether you are the creation of a designer personal God? Don't you see that *if* you're an accident and it all happened by accident, or *if* God created you, it *utterly* affects everything else you do? You can't make a *single*

move without presuming one or the other. Nobody can do anything without starting one place or the other."

It's ridiculous to say, "I don't have to know whether I'm an accident or whether I was designed with a purpose, to decide whether to sleep with this guy or not, whether to go to college and do this career, how to deal with my depression. I want something practical. I don't want to have to think about things like that."

Christianity says you *have* to think, or you're not going to be able to make intelligent decisions about daily choices. Christianity is *not* for lazy minds. Faith is *not* a matter for lazy minds. It's not saying, "Oh, I'm the person who doesn't want to think, so I just want to believe." Christianity says, "For the first time in your life maybe, *start* thinking." Christianity is not escapism.

I'll tell you what escapism is; it's whatever says, "I can make a decision about these values, and I don't have to figure out whether or not there's a God or not, whether or not the universe makes sense or not without God. I don't have to want to think of the *implications* of my decision," which many people have made that there is no God or we can't know if there's a God and, therefore, the universe should be seen as an accident.

You don't want to live with the implications of that. That's anti-intellectual. Faith is understanding, first of all. By faith we understand. We think. *Don't* be an animal, just going on instincts. *Don't* be a machine, just a matter of your programming. Be a human and engage your rational mind. Think!

Secondly, faith is...Conviction. Now here's what that means. You notice it says in **verse 1** just a fascinating little phrase, it says here, "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" Now this is one of those places where the exact Greek words are pretty important to understanding the meaning. It literally says, "...the conviction of the *pragmaton.*" Past events. Living by faith means I am convicted personally to live in line with past events, things that are no longer in front of me, but things I know affect me. That's what it means.

In other words, first of all, this means a Christian is a person who has moved beyond saying, "I believe there's a God. I know the evidence is there. I realize life doesn't make sense on naturalistic, 'non-supernaturalistic' assumptions." You see, a Christian is *not* somebody who simply believes intellectually in God, in Christ, that he died, that he was raised. A Christian is somebody who says, "*If* that's true, it *changes* the way I am. It changes the way I live."

You have not come to faith if you simply intellectually assent to things, but at some point, you have to say, "Wait a minute, if this is true, if Jesus really *did* these things, if he *did* die on the cross for me, if he *was* the Son of God born as a human being, if the incarnation, if the atonement, if the resurrection..." - If these things are true, you get personally convicted - "That changes the way I am now." That's what it says.

The life of faith is living in light of being controlled by what Jesus did, by those great events the gospel proclaims: the Son of God *born* as a human being, *died* on the cross for our sins, *raised* on the third day. In other words, a Christian is somebody who says, "If he is King, I can't live as if *I'm* the king. I am living that way, but I'm going to stop." That's repentance.

A Christian is somebody who says, "If he died for my sins, why am I crushed under guilt? On the one hand, because if he died for my sins I don't have to be crushed with self-hatred and guilt. But on the other hand, if he died for my sins how in the world can I *live* in this kind of behavior since he died to get me out of it?"

See, a Christian is somebody who draws a line from what happened – the historical testimonies of the gospel - that which we don't see right in front of us. Instead of going on appearances, instead of simply living in the present, a Christian is somebody who is controlled by what happened. Now Paul gives a great example of this. I'll just give one perfect and classic illustration, but it just shows how the life of faith is *not* - at all - a matter of brainwashing. It's not closing your eyes and just acting in a certain way. It's a deeply rational process, but it goes *beyond* reason.

Faith is not less than reasoning, faith is not less than thinking, but it is much more. Faith is not less, but it's far more. Here it is. Paul tells us about a story, something that happened in his letter to the Galatians. He tells us he had an argument with Peter. Peter and Paul were both Jews. Jews had traditionally been taught Gentiles could not be pleasing to God because of their practices - the way they ate, the way they handled life, the way they did things - and because of their lack of pedigree. They just weren't the right sort of people. Because of their pedigree and because of their practices, they weren't "clean". They weren't pleasing and acceptable to God.

But in Acts 10 and 11, we know God showed Peter something remarkable. Peter believed in Jesus Christ, and God, by converting and bringing to Jesus Christ

Cornelius the centurion and his family - a Gentile group - right before Peter's eyes, He showed Peter that we do not become pleasing to God *either* by our pedigree or by our practice but through *faith in Christ*. Because when we believe, we're *united* to Christ.

Classic illustration of faith. If you're falling off of a cliff and you see a branch sticking out of the cliff, how much faith do you need in the branch for it to save you? Do you need complete certainty? Do you need to do a stress calculation on the branch to determine it's load bearing capacity and then you have faith? No. You need just enough faith to *grab it*. And if it holds you, you will know it's not the strength of your faith, but it was the *truth* of your faith that saved you. It was the strength of *the branch*. And when you grabbed it, your faith united it to *its* strength.

Jesus' pedigree is perfect; Son of God. Pretty good family! Jesus' practice was perfect. He lived a perfect life, and he died an innocent, sacrificial death to pay for our sins. When you unite with him by faith - not perfect faith, not strong faith, but the truth - that pedigree becomes *yours*. You're as acceptable as if you were from that wonderful family. You're in the family. *His* practice, *his* life, *his* death, everything he paid for, everything becomes yours.

When Peter realized that, he began to eat with the Gentiles. He realized people are not saved by their pedigree or by their practice. They're saved by faith when that faith unites them to Jesus. *But* old prejudices die hard, and some people came to Peter and said, "How could you be eating with those unclean Gentile dogs? Yeah, they're Christians, but they're still Gentiles." And he stopped eating with them. And Paul looked at him at one point, and he said in Galatians 2, "I opposed Peter to his face because he was clearly in the wrong." Why? Because Peter's behavior was not in line with the gospel.

Do you want to know what it means to live a life by faith? It means you're continually looking at what Jesus did. Are you saved sheerly by grace, are you saved sheerly by what he did? His life, his death, and all that? Then what you're constantly looking at is you're looking at yourself and saying, "Are my *feelings* in line with the gospel? Is my *behavior* in line with the gospel? Is my *thinking* in line with the gospel? Look, I'm depressed. Is that in line with the gospel? I feel guilty. I feel terrible. Is that in line with the gospel? I'm proud. I look down my nose at other people. Is *that* in line with the gospel?"

That's the life of faith. That means Christianity is *not* a bunch of rules. Does the Bible say racism is a sin? Yes, but *why*? Just an abstract violation of a rule? No. Racism is a sin because it's not in line with the gospel. We're all sinners saved by grace. Pedigree doesn't mean anything. We *all* should be lost, but we're all saved - those of us who believe. Pedigree means nothing.

Faith impacts everything. Everything! The life of faith is not a matter of, "Here are a bunch of abstract doctrines. I have to believe them in spite of the evidence. Here are a bunch of abstract rules. I have to obey them in spite of the evidence." No! Once you see this is coherent, *then* you say, "Because of what Jesus Christ *did*, I am certain of the things, you see. I'm *convicted* by those things which happened, and I live my life out of it."

Okay, lastly, and this is the one we'll probably talk about most during this summer. Faith is not simply understanding and conviction. Then you have to live it out in ...**Commitment.** And I've already started talking about that in a sense. Just to say this. You *cannot* know the certainty of anything without commitment. I know we hate that. Modern people want to be certain before we commit, but you can only be certain *after* you commit. I want you to realize you can't avoid commitment.

If you don't believe in God, if you're living your life as if there is no God, if you're living your life as if there is no judgment day, if you are living your life as if there are no eternal ramifications for what you've done, if you're going to live your life as if Jesus Christ did not die for you, if you're living your life like that, *that's* a commitment. You are betting your life he is not a Judge. You're betting your life there is no Christ. You're betting your life there is no God.

You don't know that! You're waging your entire life and your entire destiny on a faith premise. I'm not saying that's wrong. I'm saying that's the only way anyone can live...but I want you to know what you're doing. Christians are people who have thought things out. They haven't picked up their religion by going to Religion 101 at school and seeing everybody ridicule orthodox religions, saying, "Boy, I don't want to be stupid." That's not thinking. That's peer pressure. That's emotion.

Christians are people who have thought out what it means to believe. They realize if Jesus did the things he said he did, a Christian is convicted that, "I'm going to live in line with that." And the more you live out of that and the more you *commit* to that and the more you *rest* in that...the more certain you will find he is who he said he is. Anslem of Canterbury's

famous definition of Christianity - *Fides quaerens intellectum*: "Faith in Search of Understanding."

But it all starts with faith. You gotta have faith. All those layers coming together. Are you ready to do that? *Can* you do that? Christian friends, live the life of faith. Humbly! None of us do it like we should. But ask yourself, "Is what I'm doing in line with the gospel?"

Those of you, my friends, who don't know whether you're a Christian or not - or maybe you thought you were a Christian before you came today and now you're wondering - don't stop thinking and exploring and digging until you come to the place where you can say, "I am certain of the things I don't see. I know these things to be true...by faith."

Let's pray...