

Hebrews 11:1-7 "Living By Faith"—part one**

Main Idea: In Hebrews 11:1-4, we learn what living by faith is all about. In this passage the writer allows us to see faith from two vital perspectives.

I. We see faith defined (1).

A. Faith involves the confident expectation of future realities.

1. We know what is coming.
2. We need to live like it now.

B. Faith involves the conviction of unseen realities.

1. We know what Christ did in the past.
2. We know what Christ will do in the future.
3. We know what Christ is doing in the present.

C. Definition: Faith is trusting in the person of God and acting on the promises of God regardless how I feel.

II. We see faith displayed (2-7).

A. We see it by looking at God's people in the past (2).

1. All people are sinners.
2. All people face challenges in life.
3. God commends people who live, not by their feelings, but by faith.

B. We see it by affirming the creation account (3).

1. Faith is not believing something in spite of the facts.
2. Faith is believing the account of the One who knows all the facts.

C. We see it by looking at Abel (4).

1. He saw himself as an unworthy sinner.
2. He approached God on the basis of mercy, not merit.
3. He received God's commendation for his actions.
4. He eventually died, but he still is speaking to us.
5. He tells us we need to be people who live by faith.

Application: To make living by faith a greater reality in your life...

1. Memorize the biblical definition of faith.
2. Meditate on the promises of God.
3. Motivate yourself by studying men and women who model faith.

Consider the following three scenarios. They all have something in common. See if you can identify what it is...

Scenario #1: The Shanghai courtroom grew silent as the judge raised his voice and addressed the defendant, a Christian by the name of Philip Xu. "Will you stop talking about Jesus, or will you persist in undermining the good laws of our country with your subversive religious notions? That is the question. Stop your preaching, and you may go free. Continue, and you will go to prison for a very long time. Which will it be?" All eyes turned upon young Xu and waited for his answer. They didn't have to wait long. "I am grateful for my country and I desire to be a good citizen. But I am also a citizen of another country, a heavenly one. My heavenly king so loved the world that He died in the place of sinners like me, rose from the dead, and offers eternal life to all who will believe in Him. He has commanded me to spread the good news about Him, and I will not disobey Him."

Scenario #2: A teenage boy is browsing the internet working on a project for school, when all of a sudden up pops a provocative screen with a picture of a scantily clothed woman. The young man swallows hard, realizing he's all alone in the house and facing a significant decision. No one will know, or will they? "Lord, help me!" the teen whispers, and quickly proceeds to click the deny button and get rid of the Proverbs 7 woman.

Scenario #3: It's the deal of a lifetime, occupationally at least. That's what Steve's CEO tells him as he maps out his proposal for the plant manager position. "Your salary will jump 30 percent, and so will your clout in the business world, not to mention your standard of living," the boss explains. "There's just one slight reality check," he adds. "You'll need to loosen up a little bit on your commitment to 'do things by the books.' But after all, as you know, the purpose of this company is to make a profit, and sometimes that requires that the appropriate people turn a blind eye to those pesky, unrealistic government regulations. And I'd like for you to become one of my 'appropriate people.' Are you in?" Steve took a moment to ponder the proposal and then responded, "Sir, I'm humbled at your confidence in me, and you know I enjoy working for you and this company. And I am grateful for your generous offer. However, you know that I am a follower of Christ, and as His follower I will do nothing that will bring dishonor to Him. If taking the new job means I must play games with the truth, with all due respect I must decline your offer."

Now, what's the common element in each of those scenarios? What do Philip Xu, the teenage boy, and Steve have in common? Courage? Yes, but there's something more fundamental, something at the core that makes their courage possible? In a word, it's *faith*. These three individuals are living by faith.

Quite frankly, there's a lot of talk in our country about faith these days. We have faith-based programs. We have political leaders who promote themselves as being "men and women of faith." We're told that if we're going to turn the economy around, we must "have faith" in the future of our country. We hear the athlete talk about having "faith in his teammates." The artist attributes her success to her "faith in herself." And on and on the faith-talk goes.

There's a world of difference between popular notions of faith and the kind of true, biblical faith exhibited by Philip Xu, the teenage boy, and Steve. We might say there's a difference between talking about faith and truly living by faith. But what exactly does it mean to *live by faith*? What is real faith, and what does living by faith really involve?

I want to know the difference, don't you? I want to experience the difference. The One who gave His Son for me is worthy of the difference. That's the message of Hebrews 1-10, as we've seen in over thirty

weeks of study. Jesus Christ is worthy—there's none greater in the universe. And if you believe that, the appropriate response is *faith*, indeed, *living by faith*. That's the message of Hebrews 11.

This morning as we ponder the message of Hebrews 11:1-4, we're going to begin to learn what living by faith is all about. In this passage the writer allows us to see faith from two vital perspectives.

I. We see faith defined (1).

I don't mean *defined* in a Webster's Dictionary sense, for the writer of Hebrews didn't intend to give us that. He's speaking to a particular audience of first century Jewish Christians, *persecuted* Jewish Christians to be precise, some of whom were considering throwing in the towel and going back to their old ways. He's calling these readers to exhibit real *faith*, and wants them to know what that will mean in practical terms.

So he says in verse 1, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." For the writer of Hebrews, faith isn't generic but specific, not subjective but objective, not formal but personal, not static but dynamic, not merely a church-word but a life word.

Now faith *is*, says the writer. In the Greek text, "is" is the first word in the sentence, emphasizing that biblical faith is a present and continuing reality. As Leon Morris explains, "It is a living thing, a way of life the writer wishes to see continued in the practice of his readers."^[1]

Faith involves two components, according to verse 1. Did you catch them?

A. Faith involves the confident expectation of future realities. That's what the first phrase says, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for." The Greek word for "sure" ["assurance" in the ESV, "substance" in the KJV] is *hypostasis* which literally means "that which stands under." As Leon Morris explains, "Faith is the basis, the substructure of all that the Christian life means, all that the Christian hopes for."^[2] Or as Warren Wiersbe sums it up, "Faith is to a Christian what a foundation is to a house."^[3]

By the way, when people come for counseling they often perceive their primary problem to be a marriage breakdown, or anxiety, or some financial strain. But typically, those are fruit issues, and the root issue is a *faith* issue, and because the person's faith-foundation isn't solid, the windows in the house have cracked, hence the marriage or personal problem.

So faith is being *sure*, says the writer. Again, that's not how our society views faith. Far from being *sure*, we're told that faith is merely your opinion in a sea of other legitimate opinions. These days, asserting that you know the truth that others don't know and need to know is a totally unacceptable kind of faith. Yet that's the nature of biblical faith. Faith is being *sure*, and specifically being sure *of what we hope for*. The fact is...

1. *We know what is coming.* We know that Jesus the Christ is coming. We know that eternal life awaits those who know the person of Christ. How do we know that? We know it because we have the promise of God (see 10:36-38). And since we know what is coming...

2. *We need to live like it now.* That's the point Hebrews is making. Faith involves living with a confident expectation of future realities. A second component...

B. Faith involves the conviction of unseen realities. "...and certain of what we do not see." Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't real. Take wind, for example. You can't see it, but who can deny its existence? Let me give you three examples of unseen realities that we know to be absolutely certain, and we know them by faith.

1. *We know what Christ did in the past.* We know that two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born in a stable in Bethlehem, lived thirty-three years of sinless life, died on a cross in the place of sinners, rose from the dead on the third day, commissioned his followers to tell the

world about Him, and then returned to heaven as a victorious Savior. Those events are unseen realities to us, but they've been recorded in the pages of Scripture by men who did see them. Consequently, we know what Christ did in the past. Here's a second unseen reality...

2. *We know what Christ will do in the future.* We know it because He announced it. "I will come back and take you to be with me (John 14:3)." "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me (Rev. 22:12)."

3. *We know what Christ is doing in the present.* "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age," He said in Matthew 28:20. So right now in the present, He is *with* us.

Many people today don't understand that there is a *content* to saving faith. They're like the coal miner that the great evangelist George Whitefield once met in Cornwall, England. Whitefield asked the man what he believed.

"Oh," he said, "I believe what my church believes."

Whitefield probed, "And what does your church believe?"

"Well," the miner returned, "the church believes what I believe."

Seeing that he was getting nowhere, Whitefield then asked, "What do you both believe?"

To which the man responded, "We both believe the same thing."

That sort of content-less faith isn't saving faith. The person with saving faith knows what Christ did in the past, is going to do in the future, and is doing now in the present.

Beloved, these unseen realities, and many more, are things we know. We know there is a heaven and a hell, there is sin and forgiveness, and we know these unseen things are just as real as the clothes we're wearing and the pews we're sitting in.

We didn't use to know that because we didn't use to have saving faith. We didn't enter the world believing in God and His Son, Jesus Christ. We entered the world oblivious to Him, and oblivious to the unseen realities that we now cherish. But in His grace God gave to us the gift of faith (faith indeed is a gift; see Eph. 2:8-9), and so now we are sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

But what exactly is faith? Let me give you a couple of helpful definitions I found, and then I'll offer you my own. Here's one by Raymond Brown, "Faith is man's response to what God has said."^[4] Here's another by Warren Wiersbe, "True Bible faith is confident obedience to God's Word in spite of circumstances and consequences."^[5] Here's my own working definition...

C. Definition: Faith is trusting in the person of God and acting on the promises of God regardless how I feel.

That's what a person must do to be saved. He must trust in the person of God, namely in His Son Jesus Christ, and act on the promises of God, such as "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (Acts 16:31)," and do so regardless how he feels. But faith isn't just for saving. It's for living. Every day I must choose to trust in the person of God and act on the promises of God, regardless how I feel.

Please realize that people who live by faith look at life differently than people who lack faith. That's why Philip Xu was willing to go to prison, why the teen boy refused to look at the pornography, and why Steve turned down the job promotion, in the illustrations I shared at the beginning.

If a person isn't living in light of future and unseen realities, then that person will simply do what feels right in the moment. If he can get some sensual pleasure, he'll go for it. If he can make a bigger salary merely by telling a few white lies, it's a no brainer, because he's living for what he can see in the present.

Not so the person who lives by faith. He trusts in the person of God and acts on the promises of God regardless how he feels. A definition is good, but we need more than words. If we're going to live by faith, we need examples, and that's what the writer gives us in the next thirty-nine verses, a great hall of fame of faithful men and women. Having seen faith defined in verse 1, beginning in verse 2...

II. We see faith displayed (2-7).

In verses 2-4, which we'll look at today, we see it displayed in three ways.

A. We see it by looking at God's people in the past (2). "This is what the ancients [lit. "the elders," *presbuteroi* in the Greek] were commended for."

In the rest of the chapter, the writer will mention eighteen examples by name of "the ancients," and a host of others by description. He wants his readers, not only to understand faith, but to see it. Scan the list and you'll see a host of names: Abel, Enoch, and Noah (their stories found in Genesis 1-11); Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (their stories taken from Genesis 12-50); Moses' parents and Moses (taken from Exodus through Deuteronomy), Rahab (mentioned in Joshua), Gideon, Barak, Sampson, and Jephthah (mentioned in Judges), David and Samuel (mentioned in 1 & 2 Samuel), and the prophets.

Quite a list. The writer organizes it basically chronologically. It's worth noting who didn't make the list (he stops before he gets to such heroes as Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah; yet he does refer to some of these by description, if not by name).

What do we learn from this list? All the people on the list, though very different in terms of personality and circumstances, have some things in common, three to be precise. From the list, we learn, first of all, that...

1. *All people are sinners.* The writer didn't pick perfect people for his display of faith (or the chapter would be blank). Noah got drunk. Abraham lied. Jacob had four wives at the same time. Samson got involved with a prostitute. David had rebellious kids. The folks included in this list were what we all are. Sinners. The list teaches us, secondly, that...

2. *All people face challenges in life.* Huge challenges, as we'll see. And yet when you look carefully at the list you discover a third common element...

3. *God commends people who live, not by their feelings, but by faith.* "This is what the ancients were commended for." By faith...by faith...by faith... The words appear again and again. When life got hard, by the grace of God these folks chose to trust in the person of God and acted on the promises of God, regardless how they felt. And they beckon us to follow in their footsteps.

The writer gives a second display of faith in verse 3, one that includes the readers. He 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." Do you want to see faith? The writer says...

B. We see it by affirming the creation account (3). By faith *we understand*, he says. There's something that we know, we, the first century readers and by application *us*. What do we know? We know that God created the universe. It didn't just come into being. It's not here as the result of natural causes. It was "formed" (Greek *katartidzo*, to complete, prepare, create) at God's command (literally, "by the word of God").

More specifically, the writer says that what we see today (the physical stuff of the universe) was not made out of what was visible. In other words, contrary to a fundamental tenet of evolution, there was no preexisting matter that became the building blocks of the universe as we know it. There was *nothing*, then God spoke, and by the power of His Word the universe came into existence, the wonderfully developed universe.

Of course, if you want to see the details of how He did it, read Genesis 1. He took six days, on each day *He spoke* into existence another facet of His creation.

Now how do we know that? The writer says it is *by faith* that we understand this. We cannot prove the creation account. That's not to say there isn't evidence for it, but in the end, since we weren't there, we can't prove what happened on the first six days of this universe. We affirm it *by faith*.

By the way, any explanation of how the universe came into existence, and that includes evolution, is faith-based. Since we weren't there, we can't prove what happened. Yet realize this. We do know what happened because we have the record of the only person who was there.

Think of it this way...

1. *Faith is not believing something in spite of the facts.* Rather...

2. *Faith is believing the account of the One who knows all the facts.* And the One who knows the facts says this in His Word, John 1:3, "Through him [referring to Christ] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

I like John Calvin's assessment. In his commentary on verse 3 he writes, "We are no different from brutish beasts if we do not understand that the world was made by God. Why are men endowed with reason and intellect except for the purpose of recognizing their Creator?"^[6]

Leon Morris writes, "For the author the visible universe is not sufficient to account for itself. But it is faith, not something material, that assures him that it originated with God. His view is nonetheless certain because it is based on faith, and he does not qualify his statement as though any doubt were possible. This is God's world, and faith assures him that God originated it."^[7]

When a person affirms the creation account, he's putting faith on display. When a sophomore affirms, in spite of the snickers of his biology instructor and classmates, "I don't agree with your assessment that human beings, with all of the amazing complexities of their makeup, have evolved from some primeval chemical soup. I choose to believe the historical account of the Creator Himself who says in His Word, 'The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7).'" that sophomore is putting faith on display.

How about you? Are you affirming the creation account? "Well, it's complicated," you say. "The scientists disagree." My friend, listen to Hebrews 11:3. It's *by faith*. The evolutionists weren't there, and neither were we. The question is, will you or will you not put your trust in the person and words of the Living God, regardless how you feel? I invite you to join the ranks of the people in Hebrews 11 and put your faith on display.

And now we come to what the seventeenth century Puritan, Richard Sibbes, called, "a little book of martyrs."^[8] According to verse 4 we see faith displayed by looking at Abel.

C. We see it by looking at Abel (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."

Cain and Abel, of course, were brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve. They never knew the paradise their parents knew and forfeited, for sin entered the world in Genesis 3, and these brothers were born into a post-Genesis 3 world, Genesis 4 to be precise.

The writer of Hebrews points out five things pertaining to Abel.

1. *He saw himself as an unworthy sinner.* That's why he offered God a sacrifice. He heard the story from his parents. He knew that God created them, but that their sin had alienated them, and all their descendants, from Him. But Abel knew his problem wasn't merely his parents' sin. It was his own sinful disposition that he inherited from his parents, and his own sinful choices that resulted from that

disposition. That's why Abel brought his offering to God, because he saw himself as an unworthy sinner.

"But Cain brought an offering, too," you say. "Did he see himself as an unworthy sinner?" No, Cain did not, as was apparent by God's assessment of his offering, and his bitter response to God's assessment.

I know it for another reason, one found in Psalm 51:17. It's there that David said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." So if God accepts the sacrifices of a person with a contrite heart, what does that say to us about Cain? If Cain had possessed a contrite heart, God would have accepted his sacrifice. But Cain didn't, unlike his brother, and so God didn't.

We learn something else about Abel. Unlike Cain...

2. *He approached God on the basis of mercy, not merit.* He offered God a "better sacrifice" than Cain, literally a "more sacrifice" (*pleiona thusian*). It's the same word we find in Matthew 5:20 where Jesus says a person's righteousness must *exceed* that of the Pharisees if he's to enter the kingdom of God. It's also used to say that the widow's two mites were *more* than the offerings given by the rich (Luke 21:3).^[9]

What made Abel's sacrifice better? Bible scholars differ as they speculate. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain worked the soil and offered God "the fruits of the soil," whereas Abel kept flocks and "brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock (verses 3-4)." My hunch is, Abel's offering was better because of *what* he offered—his offering required the death of a substitute and was a bloody offering, and we know from Leviticus 17:11 that it is "the blood that makes an atonement for the soul." Conversely, Cain simply offered produce to God, no blood, no death of a substitute involved. I say that's my hunch because the text doesn't specify that Abel's offering was better because of *what* he offered.

But it does highlight *how* he offered it. *By faith* Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. Abel presented his offering to God *by faith*, the assumption being that Cain did not.

Abel saw himself as an unworthy sinner. He agreed with God's assessment communicated to his parents in Genesis 3. He agreed that sin separates the sinner from God. He agreed that he could not come to God on the basis of his own merit. So he approached God on the basis of mercy. He'd heard the story of how God had killed animals to cover his parents' guilt, shame, and nakedness. So he killed an animal and presented it to God, and he offered it *by faith*.

But Cain did not come by faith. He didn't think he needed to, for he saw himself as a good guy, a worthy sort of fellow. Sure, he brought God an offering, because that's what good guys do. They do religious things to prove to God (and others watching) that they're serious about patching things up with God. But they do it on their terms, not His, on the basis of their merit, not His mercy.

May I say that churches this morning are filled with people just like Cain, good people, giving people, upstanding people? That's why they've come to church, because that's what "good people" do. They refuse to agree with God's Word that their good works are as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6), and that "there is none righteous, no not one" (Rom. 3:10). Beloved, there's only one person whose merit takes Him into the presence of God, and that's the One who lived a perfect life. The rest of us must approach God on the basis of *mercy*, not merit, or to put it another way, by *faith* in His merit.

3. *He received God's commendation for his actions.* "By faith he was commended as a righteous man." Again, not because of his works but his *faith*. That's why God commended Abel. That's always God's way. "By grace are you saved *through faith*, not by works (Eph. 2:8)."

Centuries ago Gregory the Great put it this way, "It is obvious that it was not the offerer who received approval because of the offerings but the offerings because of the offerer."^[10]

4. *He eventually died, but he still is speaking to us.* "And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead." But wait. Abel's dead, for Cain killed him cold-blooded. How's he still speaking? He may have died, but people who live by faith don't cease to exist. They may pass from the scene, but their legacy continues. Even today, Abel is still speaking. Indeed, he's speaking to us. What's he saying?

5. *He tells us we need to be people who live by faith.* Sometimes when you live by faith, you get killed, just like Abel did. But you also get commended by the One whose assessment alone matters, just like Abel did. Listen to Abel this morning. Our greatest need is to be people who *live by faith*.

Application: To make living by faith a greater reality in your life...here are three practical suggestions.

1. *Memorize the biblical definition of faith.* Put the following on a 3x5 card this week, read it aloud morning and night until you can quote it: "Faith is trusting in the person of God and acting on the promises of God regardless how I feel."

2. *Meditate on the promises of God.* If faith is acting on the promises of God, then we must learn His promises and then go over and over them on a daily basis. Promises like: "I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5)." And, "I will never give you more than you can bear, but will always give you a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13)." And, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you (Matt. 7:7)."

3. *Motivate yourself by studying men and women who model faith.* That's what we'll be doing as we ponder Hebrews 11 in our future studies. But you don't have to wait. Pick a Bible character and study his life. Let him or her become your role-model. Or pick a person from church history, someone like George Muller, or Adoniram Judson, and become a student of their faith, and ask God to help you walk in their steps.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Leon Morris, p. 113.

[2] Leon Morris, p. 113.

[3] Warren Wiersbe, p. 317.

[4] Raymond Brown, p. 197.

[5] Warren Wiersbe, p. 317.

[6] John Calvin, pp. 158-9.

[7] Leon Morris, p. 114.

[8] Quote taken from Raymond Brown, p. 199.

[9] Explanation by Robert Gromacki, p. 184.

[10] Quote taken from Philip Hughes, p. 454.