

What do I believe, what does my heart tell me? (Hebrews 11 1-40 URC 29/9/24)

Thank-you Caroline for reading Hebrews 11 to us, quite a marathon! As a church you have spent a considerable time studying Hebrews. Thank-you for allowing me to speak on this amazing passage.

I want to do 6 things in my time with you;

1. Anchor this passage within the purposes of Hebrews, a quick reminder
2. Look at the definition of Faith and why it's really important to God and heed the author's warning.
3. Study some of the OT heroes of Faith described by the Author.
4. Think of some NT examples of Faith and what it tells us
5. Consider the author's warning that there maybe persecution in this life but that we are citizens of Heaven.
6. Consider Faith with reference to our experience with Healing on the Streets

1/

We don't know exactly who wrote this but we know that they were close to the Disciples and that they were writing to an audience who the author knows have a good knowledge of the Tora (and therefore were Jews) who were following Jesus and as a result were enduring scorn and persecution. There was a temptation to return to the old teaching of the Tora and the author is saying stay strong, hold onto the Faith you have placed in Jesus.

Faithful Jews knew about God, the commandments, the rituals and the prophets described God's promises and revealed the way to forgiveness and salvation. But Christ came fulfilling the law, conquering sin and shattering all barriers to God.

This was a difficult message for Jews to accept, considered heresy, when Jesus was ministering on earth and after his death and resurrection, though the Jews had been waiting for the Messiah for so long, when he came it just wasn't what they expected.

He will go onto explain the good reasons why they should continue to believe in Jesus and his teaching by showing it is an unpacking of what went before, NOT completely new teaching.

In the previous 10 chapters the author has expounded that Jesus is above the angels that were thought to have brought the word of God to Moses on Mount Sinai saying that Jesus radiates God's own Glory and expresses the very character of God.

He says Jesus is greater than Moses who led the exodus and built the Tabernacle.

He says Jesus is greater than the priests who offered continual sacrifices for the sins of the people AND for themselves.

Jesus is the sinless sacrifice that made further sacrifices unnecessary and reveals God's humility to his people.

2/ This context is key to understanding what follows in our passage today which starts with a definition of Faith in verses 1-2, followed by examples.

Faith is the **confidence** that what we **hope** for **will** actually happen; it gives us **assurance about things we cannot see**. Through their faith, the people of old earned a **good reputation**.

The Greek word for Hope is elpis, which means **expectation, trust and confidence** and comes from the root word elpo which means to **anticipate with pleasure**.

So this is not the way we use the word hope today, I hope it doesn't rain today, I hope I get a pay rise....

So now we can paraphrase v1

'Faith is the confidence that what we expect and are confident will happen will happen and we can anticipate it with pleasure'

V2 could read

'Through their relationship with God, the people of old enjoyed God's unrelenting and reckless love and pleasure.'

We are given assurance about what we cannot see because we can rely on the word of God. We were not around at the creation of the world, but we know from Genesis and from what Jesus tells us about his role that God spoke the world into being from what could not previously be seen (v3).

In a material world we largely draw faith by what we can see. I can see you all sitting on chairs and I have faith that they will support your weight based on past experience.

Jesus makes this point in Mathew 16:3 when the Pharisees and Saducees ask for a sign from heaven

' You hypocrites you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky but you can't interpret the signs that have already been performed'

In the spiritual world, we cannot see what is happening but we will experience it.

In the age of enlightenment in late 17th century onwards, man looked to other places to invest their faith, in science, medicine, maths and philosophy and there is a feeling that man has evolved and no longer needs God. However scientists like Alistair McGrath are very comfortable expounding that an understanding of our created world leads us to conclude that there must be a creator.

3/ The author now names 17 individuals who are heroes of faith because they trusted and pleased God and though imperfect people like you and me achieved amazing things.

In v4 Abel is described as a righteous man who pleased God with his sacrificial offering of a lamb whereas Cain's grain offering displeased God. It is thought that maybe Abel's offering (a foretaste of the sacrificial lamb to come in Jesus) was what God had asked for and/or that God saw that Abel's heart was turned to him whereas Cain's was not.

In Genesis 4v10 God says to Cain who has killed his brother 'your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground', which the audience would know when they read Hebrews 11 v4 'Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith'.

In v7 the author recalls Noah who God told to build a gigantic boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high to save him from the flood that God would send. Noah was in a desert environment with no rain and so to the people around him this was absolutely nuts!

I was lucky enough to go on a school cruise on the SS Uganda in 1969 and this ship took 300 passengers and was 516 feet long and 71 feet wide. So when in Genesis 6 v22 it says 'so Noah did everything exactly as God had commanded him', this underlies the enormity of the undertaking!

For Noah to hear God's word so clearly he must have had a close relationship with God and had faith in God which the author encourages the reader to have.

There is a clear warning in verse 6 which we should heed. ' It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him'.

Faith is not simply a belief in God, even Satan believes in God and that Jesus is the son of God, but Satan does want to give his heart to Jesus.

Faith is not wishful thinking but based on the substance of the promises of God.

In v13, the author shares an important statement that we are foreigners in this world and may not see or experience everything we would like in this world but have the surety that we will see it in the next life which is our true home, the city described in v16 that God has prepared for us.

In v28 we are reminded that Moses and the Israelites were faithful in spreading blood on their doorposts trusting that they would be released from their captors and again in walking through the red sea. Despite God protecting and directing his people with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the Israelites quickly grumbled about everything and God withheld his promise to the Israelites to enter the promised land until the older generation had died off, another warning from the author to remain faithful to Jesus.

We are shaped by our experiences, even the bad ones that allow us to be stronger when the big storms in our lives come. But we need to keep working on our faith levels as they can ebb and flow.

Elijah showed an awesome level of faith when he was the only prophet left and was pitched against the 400 prophets of Baal. They failed to get Baal to light their fire and when it was Elijah's turn he told them to make it harder by pouring water on the fire. God performed the miracle and yet afterwards Elijah was afraid and hid.

4/ Hebrews uses examples of faith that the audience were already familiar with and therefore he could in a few lines cover a vast summary of the heroes of faith.

We have the added benefit of reading the gospels and seeing the partnership between faith and God, knowing that Jesus said that if you have seen me you have seen the Father.

In Jesus' first miracle he instructs the servants to fill the vast water jars and his mother tells them to do what he says and they do.

Jesus demonstrates his authority when he tells Peter to throw his nets on the other side after a fruitless night of fishing and they haul in an enormous catch that nearly sinks the boat.

On the lake Jesus walks to the Disciples and calls Peter to have faith and walk on the water to him which Peter successfully does until he takes his eyes off Jesus and onto the material world.

In Luke 17v5 the Disciples ask Jesus 'Lord show us how to increase our faith' and Jesus tells them that if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can use the authority given to you to effect material things supernaturally.

In Luke 7 we hear of the faith of the Roman officer who understands the absolute authority of Jesus to command just as he commands his troops. Jesus comments v9, 'I tell you I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel'.

In John 20 24, we read of Jesus returning to the Disciples after his resurrection and one man is absent, Thomas. He is told by his friends, 'we have seen the Lord' but he refuses to believe in the resurrection unless he can see the physical wounds on Jesus.

Jesus is gracious and returns and says in v27 'Don't be faithless any longer, believe! You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me'.

And so Jesus is speaking to us, we weren't there in the upper room, but we have all the evidence that allows us to believe in the resurrection and thus all the other promises of Jesus.

5/ The author, speaking to an audience who are being persecuted for their faith shares in v35 that in this world, followers of Jesus have been martyred in many grizzly ways. BUT in v39 and 40 he finishes our passage by saying that

‘ All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received what God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us.

So the author is speaking to his audience then and to us now, that ;

These heroes have left a legacy with us which encourages others to follow so that more of us can reach perfection, but which also pleases God, thus earning them a good reputation.

They did not receive what God had promised on earth but can be sure of God’s promises that we will be rewarded when we meet him face to face in the next life, that is the something better that God has in mind for us.

The author warns the readers, that Jesus is God and that if they reject him and return to the old ways they will miss out on the glory that awaits them in the Messiah that they have been waiting for so long.

6/ Maria (my wife) and I have explored this subject of faith in leading Healing on the streets for 10 years over which time the team undertook thousands of prayers with people.

I believe that to maintain our own faith levels in difficult times and to effectively share ‘our story’ which is the most persuasive when we are talking to people, we need to have our own examples of God’s miraculous interaction with us.

I suggest that we all keep a notebook to record prayers and answers to prayer so that this encourages us. If we do not have personal experiences then we can research the lives of others, the accounts of the revivals and personal testimonies of those close to us whom we trust.

Jesus gave authority to the 12 Disciples, to the 72 and then to all believers over every sickness, disease and evil spirits. We have legitimacy to do this because it is our birthright, we are children of God and the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us.

It is also our inheritance, as it says in Romans 8 15-17, we are heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ.

Jesus kept reminding us that the Kingdom of God is at hand and in Colossians 3 1-3 Paul writes

‘ since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not earthly things.’

So we are to live a life on earth with a heavenly mindset and faith in the authority and inheritance we have.

The Jews worshipped in the Temple that was destroyed in 70CE, when Jesus was crucified the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom and we have access to God through the Holy Spirit as Paul says in Corinthians ‘your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit’.

So this is the substance of our faith, it is not wishful thinking as the world might believe.

Jesus encountered the obstacle of unbelief in his home town and when he went to heal Jairus’s daughter and so we need to prepare ourselves and the environment around us through constant prayer.

James called on us to exercise our faith or he said we had no demonstrable faith, so all of us can do this through persistent prayers for people. In the healing ministry Faith is spelt RISK. If you pray for someone and you see no perceptible change then do not be discouraged, you are partnering with God faithfully and it is him doing the rest, this is important to state as it removes the blame you might attribute to yourself.

So we will all have highs and lows in our Faith journey as life’s events can sometimes set us back and that is why we must through testimony, fellowship and prayer continue to encourage each other as the body of Christ seeking to bask in God’s pleasure for his beloved sons and daughters.

Simon Redman