

Heb 11:1-7 // By Faith

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[0 : 00] Our Bible reading this evening is from Hebrews chapter 10, starting at verse 36, and we're going! You will receive what he has promised, for in just a little while he who is coming will come and will not delay, and but my righteous one will live by faith, and I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.

But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. Now, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. 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.

By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

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.

[1 : 53] 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.

By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith, he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

Thanks so much, James. And if you keep your Bibles open at Hebrews chapter 11, we'll be mainly in chapter 11, verses 1 to 7.

But helpful to read in there from chapter 10, verse 36. This afternoon, I was dropping off my son at a football birthday party at the National Football Centre in Torrey Glen.

And unexpectedly, much to my surprise, discovered, found myself involved in a game of dads versus lads football.

[3 : 05] I'm still recovering now, and so are some of the kids, hopefully, after some of those tackles. Hopefully, you've had a more relaxing afternoon than me.

But whatever the case, wherever we're coming from, let's bow our heads and ask for God's help as we come to think about his words. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks. And that you speak to us through your words. And so we ask for the help of your Holy Spirit.

Whoever we are, whatever our starting point, whatever is going on in our lives at the moment, we would hear your voice this evening and learn to trust your word.

So please soften our hearts. Speak into our lives. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, none of us, I don't suppose, thinks that we're the kind of person who would shrink back until following Jesus suddenly becomes costly.

And that's why Hebrews 11 matters so much. It's one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, sometimes known as the Hall of Faith or the Portrait Gallery of Faith, a kind of who's who of Old Testament heroes.

[4 : 36] But before we get there, we need to feel the weight of what comes just before it. Because chapter 11 doesn't stand on its own.

It's helping us to answer a question. So let me ask you that question. At what age or stage of life are we most at risk of shrinking back from living for Jesus?

At what age or stage are we most at risk of shrinking back? That language, shrinking back, comes from verse 39 of chapter 10.

So when is the danger greatest? Is it the teenager who has been involved in church and kids zone all their lives, but suddenly finds themselves tempted to pull and drawn in by friends who would be involved in drink and drugs and sex?

I was chatting with my sister-in-law recently about a friend of hers. They'd been at school together and then found themselves at university in a different city.

[5 : 51] This friend wasn't from a Christian background, but she'd started coming along to church with her. And her faith really seemed to come alive. And she stood up publicly and professed faith.

She was all in. She even started going out with a Christian guy from church. But then after a while, he ended the relationship.

He knew it wasn't godly how they were going about things, and his conscience wouldn't let it continue. And in that moment when following Jesus suddenly became very costly, she walked away, she stopped coming to church, stopped trusting in Jesus.

And now, years and years on, you can't even talk with her about Jesus. The danger is we hear that kind of story and we think, well, that's really sad in all sorts of ways.

It's really sad. But that would never happen to me. That's the danger. But most people who walk away from Jesus didn't think it would happen to them either.

[7 : 05] We thought about the teenager. What about the graduate who, as a student, was once very vocal, once spoke openly about Jesus, but now in the open plan workplace, starts to shy away from standing out so that most of her colleagues wouldn't even know that they're a Christian.

It would be a surprise for them to find out. Or is it the 30 or 40-something who's always sought to honour and prioritise Jesus in everything, but now longing to be married is just toying with compromise, beginning to daydream, beginning to wonder, does it really matter if that potential partner I quite like doesn't yet follow Jesus?

Is it the older Christian? We're hearing about King Solomon in his old age this morning. Is it the older Christian? A real stalwart of faith for many a decade, but now feeling the wear and tear of age.

And so the temptation for some is just simply that they quietly begin to disconnect and disengage. Of course, for some that's not a choice.

They'd love to be here this evening, for instance, but frailty means that they can't be. Can I just say how encouraging it is for those younger in the faith to see faithful saints of every age still turning up, still trusting in Jesus, still walking with him.

[8 : 39] That quiet, steady faith speaks volumes. But here's the reality. None of us is immune.

Different stages, different pressures, same danger. No big moment, no dramatic decision necessarily, just slowly, quietly drifting, shrinking back.

So when is the danger greatest? The answer is any age, any stage, which is why Hebrews says, chapter 10, verse 36, you need to persevere.

Not just at the start, not just in a crisis, all the way through. Because the stakes are very real. Verse 39. We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Interesting, isn't it, that the opposite of faith here isn't disbelief or unbelief, but shrinking back. It's an action word.

[9 : 48] So the question for us is, what kind of faith actually endures? What does it look like, not just to start well, but to keep going? Now just for a moment, let me show you where we are in Hebrews.

Let me remind you that right at the center, chapters 5 to 10, we've seen Jesus, our perfect priest, the one who's done everything needed to bring us to God. And because of that, twice the letter says, either side of that, let us draw near, let us hold fast, let us keep going.

But on either side of those two bookends, we're given a couple of big pictures. And back in chapters 3 and 4, the wilderness generation, Gen W, we called them back in the autumn when we're in chapter 3 and 4, they'd heard God's word, but hardened their heart to God's word.

And they didn't make it. Hebrews says, don't be like them. And now in chapter 11, we're given the opposite. We get the heroes of the faith, these real legends of the Old Testament, a whole series of lives, men and women who trusted God and kept going in the face of considerable hardship.

Hebrews says, Be like them. Learn from their faith. Be inspired to persevere like them. Emulate these guys.

[11 : 15] So you see what Hebrews is doing. It's saying, don't shrink back like them, but keep going like these. That raises a question for us.

How? How do we keep going? What kind of life actually looks like that? We need faith if we're going to endure, but not just any kind of faith.

What kind of faith actually keeps a person going? We'll look down at verse 1. Chapter 11, verse 1. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

This is not a full definition of faith, obviously, but it gives us exactly what we most need to hear when we're struggling, when we're tempted to shrink back.

Faith is trusting God's words about what you cannot see. Because that's the issue, isn't it? What is going to shape your life?

[12 : 24] What you can see and feel right now? What you can experience? Or what God promises, but you can't yet see?

What's going to shape your life? Will you live your life based on the cost of following Jesus now? Or the future that God promises?

See, faith is about making life decisions about who you are and how you're going to live your life on the basis of things that we cannot see. Now just to be clear, this isn't blind faith.

Christian faith isn't close your eyes and hope for the best. It's a response to something, to God's word in history. Every day we trust things that we cannot see because we have good reason to. If I'm standing on Stone Lower Road in Burnside, I can't see the number 18 yet at the bus stop. I trust it's coming. Why? Because there's good reason to trust it's been reliable before because the timetable tells me that it's on its way.

[13 : 35] There's other people waiting for that bus. Christian faith works a little bit like that.

Hebrews has just told us that Jesus is our great high priest, that his death in our place gives us access to God.

But we weren't there personally. We didn't see Jesus teach. We didn't see him perform his miracles. We didn't see Jesus dying on the cross.

We don't see him now at the Father's right hand. But we do have good reason to believe in no eyewitness testimony and trust in the reliability of their accounts and the Gospels.

So faith isn't a leap in the dark. It's stepping forward based on what God has revealed about himself and made known to us.

That's exactly what verse 3 says. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command. Now the author is taking us back here to Genesis chapter 1 where God speaks and what he speaks becomes reality.

[14 : 48] He says it and it is. But here's the point. None of us were there. No one stood and watched the world come into being.

No one observed that moment. So we can't go back there and test it. We can't rewind it. We can't reproduce it in a laboratory. And every view of the world's beginnings, whatever they are, in the end, asks you to trust in something you didn't see.

So what do we do? Well, we all trust something. You can trust what God has said or you can believe that everything and all its beauty and variety and complexity is just as the atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell put it, an accidental collocation of atoms.

But that's not the absence of faith. That's just a faith of a different kind. Faith is inescapable. By the way, Bertrand Russell was once asked, what would you do if you're wrong?

What would you do if you're wrong? If you die and there is a God that you have to stand before. In fact, missing a beat, he said, I'm sorry, God, but don't blame me. There's not enough evidence.

[16 : 09] Not enough evidence. But many people in the world look at the same world, the same history, the same person of Jesus and conclude that there is enough evidence, that there is a reasonable thing to believe what God has revealed to us through his word.

And Hebrews says, faith is building your life on what God says, even when you can't see it. Which means every day as a Christian, you're making a calculation.

Is what God promises in the future worth what it costs right now? That's the question. Because you can feel the cost now, can't you?

You can feel the social awkwardness, the isolation perhaps from family and friends, the sacrifice. You feel that. You know, we do this in all sorts of spheres of life.

Taking on cost or discomfort now for the promise of investing in something better later. If you're involved in sport, if you're preparing for a marathon, if you're saving for something, you know that there's a cost now as you prepare for the promise of something better in the future.

[17 : 34] And the reward that God promises, we can't see it. So faith says, I will live now based on what God says is coming.

And Hebrews says, that kind of life is never wasted. Verse two, this is what the ancients were commended for. Verse six, without faith, it's impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God. But you know, this means conversely that with faith, it is possible to please God.

We do please God by virtue of our faith. For the rest of verse six, anyone who comes to him must believe two things. A, that he exists and B, that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

So we can't work our way into God's favor, but if you're trusting in Jesus, however weak your faith may feel, God is pleased with you.

[19 : 01] God loves you. He looks on you with favor. And some of us really need to hear that this evening because sometimes we can mistakenly assume if life isn't going as we'd hoped, if we're struggling or licking our wounds or if we're waiting for something we badly want and it doesn't look like it's going to happen, then we can sometimes assume that God must not be pleased with us.

But Hebrews here says the opposite. If you are trusting in God, if you are earnestly seeking Jesus, God is not distant from you.

God loves you. God looks on you with favor. He is pleased with you. Which means that the God that you are being asked to trust is not against you.

He is for you. So you see, this isn't just about whether Christianity is intellectually coherent.

It's about this. Is it worth it to trust him? And if you're here, to see even exploring that, trying to figure that out for yourself, that's exactly the kind of question we'd love to help you think through.

[20 : 32] And that's really what the Hope Explored course is there for. Hebrews' answer is this. Yes, it is worth it. Infinitely so.

Because the life that God promises, the rest, the joy, the perfect peace, a kingdom that cannot be shaken is so great that whatever it costs right now, it is worth it.

There's no question about it. So that's what faith is. Trusting God's word about what you cannot see and staking your life on it.

Now let me show you what that looks like. Three lives, three portraits, three ordinary people who lived by faith. Abel, Enoch, and Noah.

We'll start with Abel in verse four. By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. So back in Genesis again, Abel kept sheep, Cain worked the soil.

[21 : 40] Each brings an offering, Cain brings some of his crops, and Abel brings the firstborn of his flock. And the Lord looks with favor on Abel, but not on Cain.

And theologians have been debating about it ever since, the reasons why, but Hebrews tells us why here. It's not simply because God somehow prefers the aroma of roast lamb to burnt toast, but what Hebrews is more concerned in is what lay behind Abel's sacrifice, what drew God's commendation, what makes his example still speak to us today, was faith.

Abel had faith. And at a heart level, Cain was not a man of faith. He was happy to give God something.

He was happy to kind of turn up and pay lip service to God. But fundamentally, he's still living for himself rather than living all in for God's glory.

His token offering showed it, and it becomes unmistakably clear when God warned him, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but Cain does not listen to God.

[22 : 59] He rejects God's word and kills his brother. And he demonstrates thereby that he has no faith. But Abel, his brother, trusts God.

He believes God is worth it, and so he gives God his very best. His offering is the visible expression of his faith.

And here's the point. Even though that faith isolates him from his brother, even though that faith ultimately costs him his life, he doesn't shrink back.

And so Hebrews says he still speaks to us today. This is what costly, sacrificial faith looks like.

Faith that says, God is worth it, even if it costs me everything. Enoch is different. Now you need a good Scottish accent for Enoch, don't you?

[24 : 07] That's CH science. It's not Enoch with a K. It's Enoch, like Lach. Went for a day trip up to Loch Lomond the other day. It's Lach, Enoch.

He's different. Verse 5. By faith, Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death. He was commended as one who pleased God.

Now to feel this, you really have to go back to Genesis chapter 5. So let's turn back there, chapter 5 of Genesis. You'll find it right at the beginning of the Bible, in the Church Bibles, on page 7.

Genesis chapter 5. Genesis chapter 5.

It's like a drumbeat, a morbid death march. Doom. Doom. Doom. Adam lived.

[25 : 12] And then, end of verse 5, Doom. He died. Doom. Verse 8. Seth lived. Doom.

And then he died. Verses 11. Doom. 14. Doom. 17. Doom. 20. Doom. He lived.

Doom. And then he died. Again and again and again. The soundtrack of humanity. Unavoidable, inevitable, universal. Doom.

Doom. Doom. Doom. Doom. And then he or she died. But then in verse 24, there's this incredible contrast.

Enoch walked faithfully with God. Then he was no more, because God took him. A completely different ending for Enoch.

[26 : 14] He wasn't perfect. He wasn't perfect, but he walked with God by faith. This means that he had an ongoing personal relationship with God.

Day after day, year after year, a life of faith. And God was pleased with Enoch by virtue of his faith. So the final word in his story was not death, but life.

God took him. God reached down from heaven, as it were, and brought him to himself, so that he didn't experience death. Hebrews says, learn from that.

Keep on walking by faith. When it's hard, when you're alone, when you're feeling down and just tempted to give up and jack it in.

Because if you do, if you keep on walking by faith, the final word in your story will not be death either, but life.

[27 : 13] Finally, Noah, verse 7. By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear, built an ark.

Well, Noah is really the perfect example for the Hebrews and for us because all he had was God's word. God said, a flood is coming.

Build an ark. And Noah looks around and he kind of scratches his head. He looks up. There's blue sky above. There's dry ground beneath. There's no amber weather warnings from the BBC. No clouds on the horizon.

No one else building anything of the sort. Which means if he obeys God, he's going to look ridiculous. He's going to stick out like a sore thumb. He's going to be the object of scorn and mockery.

You can almost hear it, can't you? What planet are you on, Noah? Surely you don't still believe in that kind of thing, Noah. But God has said it.

[28 : 17] And so Noah believes him. He fears God more than he fears those around him. He trusts God's word over and above what he can see or experience.

And he acts on his faith. And when the rain comes, Noah is saved, him and his family, by God's grace. But everyone else, they're condemned because they refused to have faith, because they refused to trust God's word.

So what about you? What is shaping your life? What you can see and experience or what God has said?

Will you fear God or the people around you? Will you trust his word or your feelings and circumstances? These three lives stand before us.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Different lives, different circumstances, but the same thing right at the center of faith. They trusted God and they did not shrink back.

[29 : 39] Abel trusted God and it cost him his life. Enoch trusted God and walked with him all the way home. Noah trusted God when no one else did and looked like a right old fool until the floods of judgment came.

and every one of them was right to do so. God commended them, God received them, God rewarded them, God looked with favor on them. So the question for us isn't so much do we admire these lives?

The question is which path am I on? Because those are still only the two options available to shrink back or to live by faith?

And that begins here. Are you trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ? Trusting that his death on the cross is enough for you?

Because that's where this life of faith starts. And it's also where it continues. So this week let me ask you when it costs you to follow Jesus, when it's hard, when it would be easier to stay quiet, when you feel the pull just to blend in, what will you do?

[31 : 03] Will you shrink back? Will you keep your head beneath the parapet? Or will you trust him? Because in the end only one of those paths leads to life.

brothers and sisters, we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and are saved.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this call to keep going, to keep trusting in Jesus and his death on the cross for our right standing before you.

we cannot see all that you've promised. We want to be a people of faith at St. Silas, a people whose faith endures.

So please teach us and train us to trust your word even when it is costly. Thank you for the example of Abel, Enoch, and Noah for their courage, their perseverance, their faith.

[32 : 17] Help us not just to admire them, but to follow their example, to walk with you all our days. And in every situation this week, help us by your spirit to live by faith, trusting you in what we cannot see.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to respond now.