12-3-23

Hebrews 11:1

I thought we might spend a little time today considering faith. The entire Christian life and experience is based on faith. What is faith? What does faith involve, especially in the Christian life? Are all ideas of faith the same, and is faith blind to reality? As we consider these things, let’s keep in mind that faith is critical to the Christian experience and so it is extremely important.

Faith can be thought of as believing something that we don’t have tangible evidence of. This is a very basic definition and is the way the world tends to view faith. People tend to put their faith in other people, governments, even companies that provide goods and services. Anyone who has been around for a while knows that faith in any of these is misplaced; they will eventually let you down. That doesn’t mean that you can never trust any of these entities; we have to in order to have a functioning society or relationships. It just means that we have to be aware that absolute faith in any of them is not always going to work.

This can lead to a couple misguided notions regarding faith. One is that some people will reject it entirely. If they don’t have concrete evidence, then they won’t believe in something. Of course, if one has concrete evidence, faith is not needed. These folks believe that faith is simply a blind wishing for something that has no basis in reality.

The other possibility is that people will not have faith in some of the institutions mentioned but instead have faith in man-made ideas. Some examples are having faith in spirituality or even having faith in faith. How often do we hear the statement “I have faith,” when the faith has absolutely no basis in anything?

While these may represent extremes, most of the time people operate with some degree of belief that certain things will happen even though they don’t have evidence in hand that they will. If our friend tells us they will do something, we can generally believe that they will do it. If we leave our car with a mechanic to be worked on, we generally believe that they will do the work correctly. If we order something over the internet with our credit card, we believe that we will get the product. Again, all this is necessary if we are to live in a functioning society or in a personal relationship.

But the faith that we have in Christianity is a whole different category of faith. Just consider a couple different translations of our Scripture for today. Here in the NASB it says, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Notice that this definition is referring to things we don’t have in hand. They are “*things hoped for*” and “*things not seen*”. But Christian faith gives us the concreteness we need to hold to these things: assurance and conviction.

The NIV says, “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*.” It uses the word “confidence” instead of “assurance” in the first part. There is just a slight difference; instead of being assured, we can have the actual confidence that the promises of the Bible are true. One more, the KJV: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. Again, the word pair substance and evidence give us the idea of something tangible; something we can hold onto. This last word pair, substance and evidence, may be the best to give us the idea that Christian faith is based on reality; it is not based on wishful thinking nor is it blind faith. It has the backing of the word of God and the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

I think that all of us understand how critical faith is to the Christian. A Christian believes in Jesus, who lived 2000 years ago. We believe that He was sent by God and that He is God. We believe that He is the One who has the sole power of redeeming us from our sins so that we can be right with God. And we have never met Him. We have never seen Him. We have never gotten to sit down and have a face-to-face conversation with Him. We have never met anyone else who has met Jesus. We don’t have what most people would consider concrete evidence of the existence of our Saviour.

That is why our belief in Christ is based on faith. Now, a non-believer might hear what I just said and claim that we have blind faith. It is a faith based on wishful thinking; or even that we are too weak to deal with reality. But there are two very powerful witnesses upon which we base our faith. The first is the word of God. When a person hears or reads the Gospel message, they are being exposed to the very words of God Himself. Remember that God spoke all of creation into being; His word is powerful. The word of God can bring life to a dead spirit; it can regenerate a heart that is dead in sin. The Gospel message is capable of being the substance and evidence of what we hear.

The second witness is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity; He is God. The Holy Spirit gives life. When a person hears or reads the word of God, the Holy Spirit is the One at work in them to give them the understanding that what they hear is true. The Holy Spirit even gives them the faith necessary to believe. This is all a gift from God, a gift that He offers people; but being a gift, a person can still reject it. But the one who accepts the gift and comes to faith in Christ has all the evidence they need to believe and trust and be saved.

Christian faith comes down to believing what God says in His word, trusting in it, and taking it to heart. So for one thing, our salvation is entirely dependent on our faith. But also consider here in chapter 11 of Hebrews and the beginning of verse 6: *And without faith it is impossible to please [God]*. If we can’t please God, there is no way that He will let us spend eternity with Him. Our first act of faith is, of course, to believe in His only begotten Son Jesus for salvation. This includes making Him our Lord along with being our Saviour. As God said on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17:5, “*This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!*”

Part of listening to Jesus is taking to heart and understanding the things He said while He lived on this earth. One of the things He said in John 14:6 was: “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*” Ok? That is through Christ Jesus. In the same way the apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:10 that God has a view to “*the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.*” These things have the effect of narrowing down the faith with which we can please God. It’s not just any faith, it’s not even faith in the God of the Bible; it is faith that we have in and through Jesus Christ.

Jesus has done the work on the cross to make our salvation possible. So the only faith acceptable to God the Father is our faith in Christ; and then our good works can be pleasing to God only because we are performing them in faith in Jesus. This throws a real kink in the idea of gaining salvation by good works. Unless we do our good works through faith in Jesus, the works are unacceptable to God. And it doesn’t matter how good the works seem to the rest of mankind; it doesn’t matter how kind and giving a person is; if they have rejected Jesus then their works come straight from an evil and depraved heart with sinful motives.

When we come to faith in Christ, then we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. And our works can then be righteous before God.

Our Christian faith has to be in Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross. Through our faith in Jesus, we and our works become acceptable to God. We know that faith is crucial; proper faith in Christ is the only means of our salvation. We’ve considered how important faith is and we’ve discussed some ideas about what faith is. But in addition to these, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews gives us three points by which we can see if we have true saving faith. Here are three things that take place when our faith in Jesus is secure. First, we believe; second we are persuaded that the promises are true; and thirdly, we act on them.

Obviously, we have to believe the Gospel in the first place. As we are told in the second part of verse 6 in this chapter, “*he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*” This is something that takes place in our minds and is a demonstration that faith is more than just wishful thinking. We consider what we hear or read in God’s word. The Holy Spirit helps us to make connections so that we see how amazing the Bible is and how it all fits together. Our minds can comprehend that the Bible is speaking truth as we see the evidence of God’s work in nature; or it simply makes sense to us, again by the Holy Spirit’s leading. We come to the point where we believe in the historical Jesus.

The Bible tells us again and again that salvation comes by believing in Jesus. But we need to be careful; as we learn from God’s word, we find that giving mere mental assent to the existence of Jesus is not enough. For one thing, consider the reaction of the demons to Jesus in the Gospel accounts. They had no doubt that He was real and knew exactly who He was. But there is no salvation for them. Consider the religious leaders who rejected Him. They saw what He could do; and they knew prophecy and could have easily seen that He was the fulfillment of it. They believed that Jesus was real. Yet there was no salvation for any who didn’t turn to Him in faith.

There are many in the world who believe that Jesus was real. Some believe that He was a good teacher of morals or even that He was a prophet; but they will not accept Him as Saviour or as the only begotten Son of God. These will perish because their belief is not contained within saving faith.

Coming to God doesn’t make sense unless we really believe that He is. And part of our belief in Him is believing His word and coming to Him through Jesus Christ. Do you believe that He will reward you? If we come to Him in saving faith through Jesus, we will spend eternity with God. What more reward could we possibly hope for?

This chapter of Hebrews continues by looking as several of what we might call “heroes of the faith” and verse 13 makes a statement about them from which we get our second and third point about faith. It begins with “*All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance.*” Another way of translating “welcomed” is “persuaded”. Having seen the promises from a distance they were persuaded of them. Both ways work to the same effect: they believed also with their hearts.

With true Christian faith, we not only believe with our minds but we also believe with our hearts. Our emotions come into play as we give heartfelt praise to our Saviour. Not only do our minds tell us that God’s word is true, our hearts do also. Abraham and many others died before they received all that God had promised them. But this did not shake their faith because their faith in Him transcended death. They knew that death could not stop God from fulfilling His promises. So in their earthly life, they had faith in God that He would fulfill His promises; and when they neared death, they knew those promises still awaited them. That is believing with the heart. A faith that goes beyond earthly bounds.

One word of caution. An emotional acceptance of Christ by itself rarely works. If it is all heart and no mental decision, there is no stability because emotions are fickle and not dependable. A person who comes to the Lord Jesus strictly because they have been emotionally worked up is in serious danger of becoming apostate and falling away. Again, faith in Christ is not blind, our minds are convinced.

In the last part of verse 13 we see the third part of faith that is necessary: *having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth*. The third part of Christian faith that we need to be aware of is acting; doing; that is demonstrated here by the heroes of faith confessing. They took action regarding their belief. This is perhaps more clearly stated in James 2:17, “*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*” This is kind of a wake-up call. If we are not doing good works because of our faith in Jesus Christ, our faith is dead; and dead faith cannot lead to life.

Just to be clear, our salvation is entirely dependent on the work of Jesus and our faith in Him; our works will never bring us closer to heaven. But if we are in Christ, our good works are pleasing to God and acceptable to Him because we do them through Jesus. These things are summed up in Ephesians 2:8-10: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

What an amazing God we serve. We are saved from damnation due to our own rebellion by grace, undeserved favor. And it is through faith, the kind of faith we have been talking about. And even that is a gift from God. In this way, He gets all the glory, which He truly deserves. Furthermore, our good works, which are the evidence of our faith, are works that God planned out for us to do from eternity past. You sometimes wonder what God’s purpose is for you in this life? Each and every good work you do is God’s purpose for you. He already had it planned out.

Faith is a full and important concept, indeed, necessity, in the Christian life. It must be in and through Jesus Christ. It is not wistful; it is solid. It is not a crutch for life; it is a foundation upon which to build eternal life. It is not blind; we have the witness of God’s word and the Holy Spirit. Faith is belief with the mind, with the heart, and it leads to action in life. *[F]aith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Prayer

This morning Lord, we come to You in gratitude. We were lost in sin, facing eternal destruction; we were children of Your just wrath. But out of Your deep love and because You are glorious Lord, You made a way for us in Jesus Christ. All we must do is believe on Him in faith; then Your justice is satisfied and our sins are forever cast into forgetfulness. And You even provide the faith.

Now along those lines Father, we ask that our faith be strengthened. It is our desire that our minds are ever more convinced of the promises in Your word; most of all that Jesus’ precious work on the cross is sufficient for all our eternal needs. May our hearts be continually drawn ever closer to You, such that our love for You is deeply felt and strengthens our desire to please You. Give us strength to act and opportunity. May our lives be characterized by good works that You have planned for us.

Thank You Jesus. By Your suffering and humiliation You have made a way for us to spend eternity with You. How wonderous that will be to live forever in Your presence. You are our Saviour and You are our Lord and King. We look forward to Your glorious return as conqueror of all the earth, when we will gladly bow before You in recognition of Your Godhood and Kingship.

Blessed Jesus, it is in Your name we pray

Amen