

## Hebrews chapter 11 - The Meaning of Faith

Churchill 14/6/2007

### Introduction

'He's a real man of faith.'

'The vicar said that if I'm to get through this I must just have faith.'

Aledd Jones ends his radio show with 'keep the faith'.

Abraham was counted as righteous by God, despite actually being a sinner, because of his faith.

Sounds like faith is worth having, if you're a sinner like me!

Jesus said: "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain,

'Move from here to there' and it will move." Matthew 17:20

We have got to chapter 11 the letter to the Hebrews.

This chapter is headed in your pew Bible 'By faith'.

As chapter 11 follows on from the first 10 chapters, that will tell us something of what the writer is addressing.

He's writing to Christians from a Jewish background who, for all sorts of reasons, are being tempted to give up.

Doubting whether Christianity really is true.

Whether it's worth all the hardships and persecutions.

Whether they couldn't have more fun going with the flow, rather than following a man who ended up on a cross.

Whether they have they backed the wrong horse?

I'd be surprised if there weren't some here today who are feeling or thinking along similar lines.

Is that you?

If it's not, then it's highly likely that you'll experience something like that at some time in your future.

This is really important stuff today.

What does faith mean?

What does it look like?

And what will keep my faith strong and growing?

### What does faith mean?

So firstly, what does the word 'faith' mean for a Christian?

Well, it translates a very common Greek word that comes up 496 times in the New Testament.

There's your pub quiz fact for the day!

And it is translated as 'faith', or 'belief' or 'trust', depending on the context.

'Faith', 'belief', 'trust' in your New Testaments all translate the same Greek word.

I've found that very helpful to remember.

And when it is active, as here about people putting their faith in God, it means trust, reliance, dependence on him.

That's helpful in understanding Christian faith.

Replace the word 'faith' with 'trust' and you will soon see if you understand what you're reading.

Look at the end of chapter 10 by way of an example.

The last section was all about encouraging one another to keep going as Christians right to the end.

Many give up, but he ends at verse 39 by saying: "But we aren't of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

'Believe what?', you might well ask.

Well, replace the word 'believe' with 'trust' and you read "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who trust and are saved."

Trust, depend, hold on to the Saviour like you would hold on to a life belt in a raging sea, and you will be saved.

You'll never be saved by believing things!

It's not about your intellect, your philosophy of life, saying a creed without crossing your fingers behind your back!

No, it's about a dying sinner like you and me trusting in the only one who is able and willing to save you from an eternity separated from God and all that is good.

It's not rocket science.

When you're about to go under for the third time and someone throws you a life belt, you grab it!

That is what faith means in the letter to the Hebrews.

Another helpful way of making sure you understand is to consider what is the opposite.

What is the opposite of faith?

Mistrust? Unbelief? Doubt? Something like that?

V39 says that the opposite of faith is shrinking back in fear.

"we're not of those who shrink back ...but of those who believe".

That's why the apostle John writes "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

So he goes on to say "perfect love drives out fear". 1 John 4:18

Trust, hold on for dear life, to that perfect love showed to you by Jesus as he hung on that cross in your place and, as you trust, it will drive out fear.

What is there to be frightened of, when the most powerful being in the universe, bar none, loves you that much?

He's throwing a life belt... to you.

Is our author writing about you?

Are you "not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved"?

Or is your life controlled by fear and worry and doubts?

It doesn't need to be.

You can leave fear and worry and doubt behind you on your pew and walk out of the building today, the Bible says.

Don't you want that?

So what have we learnt so far about faith?

It means trusting, depending on God who sent his son to die on the cross for you so that you'll be saved for eternity.

And so it's the opposite of fear, in fact it will drive fear out.

But it's not like faith in your pew as you sit there.

You could get scientists to prove absolutely that the oak plank you are seated on will hold your weight.

But they couldn't do the same with Christian faith.

Look at chapter 11v1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

But doesn't that sound rather like a leap in the dark?

Woody Allen said 'Diane Keaton believes in God. She also believes that the radio works because there are little men inside it.'

Chapter 11v1 sounds like that because we think of hope as being something unlikely but nice if it happens.

'I hope I can retire when I'm 55 and live in Mallorca.'

Let me show you that hope throughout this letter is very different to my unlikely retirement plans.

You could do this for yourselves.

You could skim read through Hebrews looking for the word 'hope' and then write each verse down on a notepad.

But just this once I will save you the work.

So far in this letter to the Hebrews we've read things like: "show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure." 6v11 Hope can be sure!

And a few verses later: "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure." 6v19

Then compared to the Old Testament way of getting right with God, which involved keeping all the commandments all the time, he wrote that because of Jesus "a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God." 7v19

And in chapter 10v23 he has just written "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, because"...

Hold on, why would you hold unswervingly to a hope?

Well here's the key to understanding Christian faith.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, because he who promised is faithful, depend-able, trust-worthy."

Got it?

It's not the strength of your faith that matters, but the strength & dependability of the one in whom you put your faith.

Which explains that strange comment of Jesus about 'faith as small as a mustard seed'.

It doesn't matter how strong your faith in the pew is.

You might be going through a time of great faith in 'pew'.

On the other hand, you might be having a time of real doubt.

'I really want to trust pew, but I'm finding it hard to. Oh I wish I had your faith. It must be so great to just sit there confidently, not worried about the future, trusting in pew!'

That's obviously ridiculous... but it's biblical!

It's often how the Bible makes digs at those who put their faith in idols, in non-existent gods.

What Jesus means is this.

If you have minuscule trust in the God who is totally faithful to his word and sent his son to die on the cross for you...

That is infinitely better than the strongest faith anyone ever had in Buddha or Krishna or Mohammed.

Because Krishna never existed; and Buddha & Mohammed are just ordinary men – and dead ones at that!

So they can't keep such promises, even if they had made them, which they didn't!

So what is faith in the biblical sense of the word?

It's trusting in the promises of the one true God who has proved himself totally worthy of your trust.

Proved it countless times, but most especially at Calvary.

### **What does faith look like?**

All of that, with the exception of the mustard seed, just fell out of the text of Hebrews.

But our author knows how very helpful it is to have real-life examples for us to look at and then follow.

Which is why in v2 he says "This is what the ancients were commended for", their faith & trust in that God.

And he then gives them loads of Old Testament examples of what faith in the one true God looks like in real life.

When you've got a bit of time, read through chapter 11 and look up the stories he refers to in your Old Testaments.

I have and so I can promise you that you'll love it.

But for now, let's just think about Abraham, there in v8.

We now know what Christian faith is on paper; what does it look like in real life?

v8 “By faith [he's trusting God] Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”

The man was living in Ur of the Chaldees, southern Iraq.

His family all worshipped pagan idols.

But God told him to leave his home and his wider family.

‘Where to God?’

‘I’ll tell you later. For now just pack up and head off in that direction.’

Now, you could say ‘I wish I had faith like that.’

Or you could say, I know from reading Abraham’s story that he was a very ordinary man.

Often frightened; sometimes a liar; a lousy husband.

So how trustworthy must God have shown himself to be in Abraham’s life, for him to trust God with his entire future?

Focus on the trustworthiness of God, not the faith of men.

In 1993 God guided Lynn and me to sell our house, my business, leave all our friends and family and be ordained.

To end up who-knows where.

And Linnie was so ill she was rarely out of bed.

On the face of it, pretty much the same as Abraham, no?

I can assure you that I am no better a person than Abraham sometimes proved himself to be.

But ask either of us why we did it; how we had such faith?

And we’ll tell you of the most extraordinary list of events and answers to prayers to confirm it, and you won't say ‘I wish I had your faith.’

You’ll say ‘That was a no-brainer; you had to go, didn't you.’

When Abraham got to Canaan in v9, “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.”

That's the only place in Scripture where the phrase ‘promised land’ comes up.

And God promised the land to Abraham and his descendants.

But not for then.

For the future, long after Abraham had been buried.

In fact, about 400 years after, most of which his family were to spend in Egypt, mainly as slaves.

But he lived there in his tent by faith.

Even though he died only owning one small burial plot.

He trusted God to keep his word, based on how trustworthy God had shown himself to be.

But however much God did to prove himself faithful to Abraham, it was as nothing compared to all that he has done since to prove himself faithful to you and me.

Nothing at all!

Most of God's promises, and God's keeping of those promises, happen after Abraham died!

And then came the real biggie for Abraham and Sarah.

They were old and he’d been past it for years, and anyway Sarah had been unable to have children.

Look at v11: “By faith [he’s still trusting God] Abraham, even though he was past age - and Sarah herself was barren - was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

God said they would have a son, and from him they would have a family that would one day be uncountable.

Likely? No!

Possible? Yes, all things are possible with God, I guess.

‘By faith’? In other words, did he trust God's promise?

Yes, because God had proved utterly reliable in every promise he had made Abraham in the past.

Of course, that didn't turn out to be the real biggie after all.

The real biggie came in v17, where we see just how much it’s possible to trust the promises of the one faithful God:

“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned...”

And notice that faith in such a God is reasonable, not a foolish leap in the dark....

“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”

### **What will keep my faith strong and growing?**

What is faith?

It’s trusting in the one true God who has proved himself totally worthy of your trust.

What does it look like?

Many ordinary, flawed people who've trusted his promises before you.

Final question: What will keep my faith strong and growing?

The answer’s in chapter 12 and for that you will have to come back next week.

Of course, if you really can't wait, you could always read it.

Final challenge.

God has made many vitally important promises in the Bible to you and to me.

Do you know what he has and hasn't promised you?

Do you know all the promises that he has already kept?

So will you trust him completely to keep those you need to hold on to today and tomorrow?