

Living by Faith

GENESIS 5:24; 6:9; HEBREWS 1:1-7; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:7

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM Q&A 21 AND 22

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Congregation of Christ: “I am a Christian. That is my faith... But it is not required. I have respect for all faiths. All faiths. But what I'm talking about is not faith or religion. I'm talking about spirituality.” In a recent survey, one-third of Americans said the one who said this has more “impact” on their spiritual lives than their pastors or priests.¹ Who said this? None other than the eminent American theologian, Oprah Winfrey.

This is just one of those misunderstandings of faith by both Christians and non-Christians alike. Of course, we all know that Oprah is a New Ager who preaches faith—any kind of faith—will lead to heaven. For her and other New Agers, the object of faith is anything and everything: a force, a mountain, an idea, any kind of god, including oneself. But in the Bible, the object of faith is God and Christ.

Our text today is the beginning of what is commonly known as the “Hall of Faith” or “Heroes of Faith” chapter of Hebrews. Last Sunday, we finished our study Chapters 4 through 10, where the Bible teaches that Jesus is superior to all things in the Old Testament. He is the superior High Priest, of a superior covenant, serving us from a superior heavenly temple.

The writer then transitions from this teaching to an exhortation to his readers to be steadfast in their faith in Christ through sufferings and persecutions. In the last verse of Chapter 10, he writes, *“But we are... of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”*

Hebrews 11 can be divided as follows. Verses 1-3 is an introduction, including a definition of faith. In verses 4-7, he gives the first three examples of those who evidenced faith in God: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Abraham and his family take up the most explanation, from verses 8-22. Moses occupies the next most space, verses 23-28. The last examples are in verses 29-32. The conclusion and final exhortation are in verses 33-40. In all his examples, the author repeatedly starts with “by faith,” as he drives home his exhortation for his readers to live a life of faith, pointing out the actions or events by which they evidenced their faith. Finally, he shows the outcome of their faith.

Assurance of Things Hoped For

What then is faith? According to the Preacher in verse 1, *“faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”* The definition has two parts. The first is *“being sure of what we hope for.”* The ESV uses *“assurance”* while the KJV uses *“substance.”* The word can mean all three, but also includes the idea of a “firm, solid confidence” in something, in this case, in what is hoped for. The word can also mean “reality,” as translated by HCSB, so that

¹ Sister Laurel, “NOprah,” The Reluctant First Lady, <http://www.reluctantfirstlady.com/tag/lord/>, August 31, 2014. Accessed March 21, 2017.

the believer is so confident in a hope that he considers it already a reality. This hope is not wishful thinking. It is not mindless feelings or sentimentality.

What do you hope for as a Christian? Do you have an assurance of our *“blessed hope,”* the second appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ? (Tit 2:13) Is your future resurrection from the dead as real to you as Paul’s *“living hope”*? (1 Pet 1:3) Do you *“rejoice in hope of the glory of God,”* in which you will be glorified when he returns? (Rom 5:2) Does your faith assure you of the *“hope of eternal life”* which God promised in eternity past? (Tit 1:1-2) If you have this hope and God that the world does not have (Eph 2:12), do you speak to them about the *“reason for the hope that is in you”*? (1 Pet 3:15) And do you evidence this hope before others by *“purifying yourself”* as a faithful Christian should? (1 John 3:3)

This assurance, confidence and reality of the things we hope for is the opposite of doubt. The Bible says, *“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”* (Jas 1:6). But Steven Furtick, a popular megachurch pastor, contradicts God’s Word when he says, *“The opposite of faith is not doubt, the opposite of faith is certainty. My doubt can actually serve to develop my faith.”* Where in the Bible did he get this false teaching?

Conviction of Things Not Seen

The second part of the definition of faith by the author is being *“certain of what we do not see.”* Other translations use *“conviction”* (ESV, NASB), *“evidence”* (KJV) and *“proof”* (HCSB). The original means *“the act of presenting evidence for the truth of something, proof.”*²

We hear a lot of people say, *“Seeing is believing.”* They have to see something first, before they believe it. Who does this remind you of? Doubting Thomas, of course, who said to the other disciples who have seen the resurrected Jesus, *“Unless I see... his hands... and his side, I will never believe.”* So he did, and after that, Jesus said to him, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”* (John 20:25-29).

In most contexts, *“seeing is believing”* is a good principle. Witnesses in court must testify about what they saw firsthand. In the Bible and in the church, accusations must be proven by at least two witnesses (Matt 18:16). But not so with faith. We did not see Jesus preaching and performing signs and wonders. We did not see the empty tomb, and his hands and side. We did not see the apostles healing the sick and raising the dead. We don’t see angels, but we know by faith that they’re all around us, protecting us and our families.

This is why the author of Hebrews 11 gives us examples from all Biblical history who evidenced faith through their works. Yet they did not receive or see the promises of God that they hoped for, *“These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having*

² Bauer, W., W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 315.

seen them and greeted them from afar" (vv 13, 39). Because of their unswerving faith, they were commended by God: God himself bore witness to their confident faith.

The writer gives the foundational example of faith without seeing: God creating the universe from "*out of things are not visible*" (v 3), from out of nothing. No human being was present when God spoke the whole universe into existence. But we believe this, because the infinity and design of the universe are witnesses to an Infinite, Almighty, All-knowing Creator. The psalmist knows this, "*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork*" (Psa 19:1). But rebellious sinners deny this, even if they know it is true, as Paul says, "*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse*" (Rom 1:20). They are condemned by the witness of the sun, moon, stars and immeasurably immense galaxies that are seen by all human beings.

Those who don't have faith in God would have nothing to do with assurance of things unseen. So they profess faith in visible things, not in God. Norman Vincent Peale believes in the god of self-esteem, "*Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities! Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your own powers you cannot be successful or happy.*" Steve Jobs believes in the god of self, "*Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have a *faith in people*, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them.*" Joel Osteen has faith in the mantra of words, just "name it and claim it" repeatedly, "*If we say it *long enough* eventually we're going to reap a harvest. We're going to get exactly what we're saying.*" He means wealth and health. Or this from another televangelist, Benny Hinn, "*God imparts faith, then you speak it. When the Holy Spirit touches your life there will be wealth and *your words* will be full of power.*"

But those who have faith in the unseen God, his unseen works of creation and redemption of his people receive commendation and promises, not health and wealth.

Walking by Faith Not by Sight

Starting with verse 4, the author embarks in an array of the Hall of Faith. After defining what faith is, he scans the whole of Scripture for those whose confident and assured faith was proven by their obedience to God's commands.

He starts at the dawn of history after Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden. They bore the first two of their children, Cain and Abel (Gen 4). Cain was "*a worker of the ground*," a farmer, Abel was "*a keeper of the sheep*," a rancher. The Scriptures tell us that God was pleased with Abel's offering of the firstborn of his flock, while he wasn't with Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground. We may infer from Genesis 5:21 that God commanded Adam to offer animal sacrifices after they fell into sin. So we may also infer that he taught this command to Cain and Abel and to all their other children. For about 130 years, they followed this rule, but then one day, Cain presumed that God would be pleased with his offering of the fruit of his labors from the ground. But God wasn't pleased. So Cain was very angry, and in his anger, he murdered Abel. He couldn't rule over his sinful anger.

Augustine in the fourth century A.D. wrote about two cities of the world: the City of God and the City of Man. In the City of God lived righteous people of faith, just as Abel and later Seth, who was born after Abel died, were righteous. In the City of Man lived rebellious, ungodly people, following Cain. Jude 11 says that from Cain came the line of rebellious people who walked *“the way of Cain.”* So after all these millennia, Abel still speaks to us with his faithful witness: He obeyed God, worshipped God only according to God’s Word, so God commended him before the whole world.

The next example of one who *“walked with God”* is Enoch. The Bible tells us that he walked with God 300 years! Today, it is rare to hear of faithful people walking with God 40 or 50 years. After three centuries, Enoch was not found, because God took him. In the genealogy of Genesis 5, he’s the only one who’s life did not end with, *“and he died.”* He too was commended, for he pleased God. How did he please God? Our author answers in the negative, *“Without faith, it is impossible to please him.”* All his good works were in vain if he did not believe in God. Remember as well that he was faithful to God for those 300 years while he was surrounded by a world of rebels against God. For we read in the next chapter that in those days before God destroyed the wicked world in the great flood, *“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”* (Gen 6:5).

We may think we’re doing good works, but if we don’t have faith in God, all our good works are seen by God as *“filthy rags”* (Isa 64:6). And anyone who wants to draw near to God *“must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him”* (verse 6). For how can you draw near to God if you don’t believe he exists? People who do not believe God are condemned, because as James 2:19 says, *“Even the demons believe—and shudder!”* Atheists are worse than demons who know in their minds the one true God!

Enoch was faithful even when he was surrounded by wicked people. So was Noah. By faith, Noah obeyed God’s command to build an ark because the great flood was coming, which was unknown and unimaginable to him. Imagine all the wicked unbelievers watching Noah and his family building the biggest boat in the world, when there was no huge storm in sight. A little boat for his family would not be so visible, but a boat one-and-a-half football field long, two football fields wide, and four stories high would have been a ridiculous sight! It might have taken them 50 years or more building this monstrosity,³ while all their neighbors laughed and taunted them. So Noah’s faith resulted in obedience, an obedience coupled with *“reverent fear.”*

³ The popular assumption that it took Noah 120 years to build the ark comes from Genesis 6:3, *“Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.’”* But this means that God gave man 120 years to repent before he sent the flood, and it is not clear that God wound up his flood watch when Noah started building the ark. See Bodie Hodge, *“How Long Did It Take for Noah to Build the Ark?”*, <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-timeline/how-long-did-it-take-for-noah-to-build-the-ark/>, June 1, 2010. Accessed March 24, 2017.

Nothing is said if Noah pleaded to God to save others, not just his household. But 2 Peter 2:5 tells us that he was a “*preacher of righteousness.*” So we know that for all those years he was building the ark, he was not only a prophet of doom, but was also a preacher of good news. As God was patient with all unbelievers, so was Noah (1 Pet 1:30), waiting for them to believe and repent of their sin. Noah’s faithfulness and preaching condemned the world then, but he “*became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith*” (verse 7). He and all of us inherited a righteousness that only comes from Christ’s righteousness, not our own.

Therefore, according to Hebrews 11, and affirmed by HC 21, *true saving faith* consists of three things. The first is “**a sure knowledge**” of all the truth of God’s Word. It is in our minds. It matters much *what we believe and why*, grounded in God’s Word. The second is that we “**hold for truth**” this knowledge. This means that not only are we to have a head knowledge of God’s Word, but we are to affirm, to be confident and sure that it is inspired, inerrant and infallible, authoritative and sufficient for our salvation and Christian living. The third component of true faith is “**a hearty trust**” wrought by the Spirit of God in Christ’s gracious benefits to those who believe: “*forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation.*” The first two are based in the mind, the third is from the heart. Faith is not just intellectual and mental, but it goes deep within our heart and soul. Romans 10:10 confirms this, “*For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*”

Dear Friends: These first three men commended by God—Abel, Enoch and Noah—evidenced steadfast faith. They had assurance of the things they hoped for, and had conviction of things they did not ever see.

Abel obeyed God’s commandment to worship the true God alone according to God’s Word alone. Abel was commended by God as righteous because of his faith after he died. Enoch walked in close communion with God, not knowing that God would reward him with a perfect walk with God in heaven without dying. And Noah found favor with God because he too walked with God. He trusted that God would save him and his family from the flood, years before God’s promise was fulfilled.

Hope in heavenly things. God has promised our blessed hope, the return of our Savior and King Jesus Christ. We will never see in this life our glorious resurrected bodies and eternal life in perfect communion with our Lord. But we know his promises are true, even when we are not. And we trust with all our hearts and minds that he will accomplish all that he has promised. As our bulletin quotes from Psalm 4:5, “*Put your trust in the LORD.*”

This is why Paul encourages you to be always be of good courage, because in this life, “*we walk by faith, not by sight.*” So in this life, “*make it your aim to please him*” (2 Cor 5:7-9). And in the life to come, you will enjoy God forever. When you have persevered in the faith, in the end, he will welcome you into heaven with these wonderful words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into my joy!*” (Matt 25:21)