

Hebrews 11:1-16

A Sermon

[Scott Lindsay](#)

This morning we are continuing with our study of the Book of Hebrews, picking up at verse 1 of chapter 11 and working through to verse 16 of the same chapter. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, then you will likely find at least *some* of the things written in this chapter to be somewhat familiar to you. Certainly this would be one of the more well known portions of the Bible - one that finds its way onto any number of calendars and, scenic photographs, and "verse-of-the-day" items every year.

However, because that is often the case, and because these verses, and others like them, *have* been so helpful for believers over the years, the temptation has been to take these sorts of passages, lift them from their context and, in the process, miss out on some of the fullness of meaning that can be found when we take the time to try and see how they relate to the verses around them. Hopefully, we will be able to do just that during our time together.

Now, as most of you will know, the letter of Hebrews has been a sustained argument and presentation of the person and work of Christ, and especially as it relates to God's manner of dealing with his people in the past. The thrust of the argument has been this: everything that God did *to*, *for* and *through* his people in the Old Testament was all done in anticipation of what he was planning to do more fully, more completely, more deeply through his Son - when the right time came. Now that his son - Jesus - had come, there was no more need for the Old Testament system of priests and temples and sacrifices. That, in a nutshell, has been the argument of Hebrews.

The *reason* for the writer's having to *make* this argument was that the believers to whom he was writing had been experiencing a great deal of difficulty on account of their faith and, as a result, were turning away, or at least seriously considering doing so. Apparently, many of them had been quite familiar with, and partakers of, the Old Testament system and, in the face of strong persecution and suffering, were being drawn away from Christ and back to *that*. Or, if not exactly *that*, they were at least being tempted to go back to a slightly modified version of their former beliefs, one that had a *place* for Jesus - but not the place that He rightly deserved.

At any rate, *that* situation is what gave birth to *this* letter. You see this reflected in the big structures of the letter as a whole. From the very beginning the writer has been making all sorts of comparisons between Jesus and the Old Testament system - showing how what Jesus offers is better and then, along with that, he has at several

points along the way interrupted his presentation to issue some very stern warnings about the danger and foolishness of turning away from Jesus and not properly regarding who He is and what He has accomplished.

Those two things - demonstrating the superiority of Jesus and warning people about the dangers of not embracing and *continuing* to embrace that reality - those have been the main focus from chapter 1 through to about mid-way through chapter 10. From that point on to the end of the letter, the emphasis shifts from explaining and demonstrating those sorts of thing to applying and exhorting his readers to *respond*, practically, to the things he has just explained.

We saw the first installment of this when we looked at verses 19-25 of chapter 10. Following that we looked last week at the last great warning of the letter found in verses 26-39, which has some concrete applications of its own, and now find ourselves on the threshold of the great chapter 11 - a chapter where the writer further continues to exhort and encourage his readers in practical ways.

While it would be possible to break these things down into a number of smaller sections - as a number of teachers have done with this chapter - the reality is that the whole thing works pretty well as a single unit and so, as something of a compromise, I want to divide this chapter into two uneven parts in order to focus on a couple of particulars but without disturbing too much the overall unity of the section. That is the *plan*, at any rate. Before we go any further, however, let us pray and read the text together:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him

faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

As we try and make sense of this passage, the first thing I want to draw your attention to is the “definition” of faith that is provided in verses 1 and 2. There are essentially two key phrases included in the definition, as it stands here. “Faith”, the writer says, is:

- 1) the assurance of things hoped for,
- 2) the conviction of things not seen

Now these phrases may be outlining two different aspects of faith, or they may well be two different ways of referring to the same thing. At the end of the day, attempts to nuance them are probably distinctions without a difference. Both of them are conveying essentially the same idea: that faith is *being assured and convinced of things promised but not yet fully received*. As one writer points out, an example of this sort of thing has already been provided for us in the previous chapter. In Hebrews 10:34, it says:

...For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, **since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one....**

That is Hebrews 11:1 in living color, isn't it? – People joyfully enduring the plundering of their possessions because of their *confident assurance that the blessings that awaited them in heaven, which they had not yet seen, were nevertheless certain and secure and would surely be enjoyed by them - someday*. And, in acting that way, the original recipients of this letter were simply responding just like so many “people of old” that had come before them - and rightly ought to have been commended.

Having said all of that, it is important to recognize that while these verses tell us some important things about faith - and are in that sense a definition of faith - they do not tell us everything about faith that might be said. They do not give us an exhaustive explanation of faith.

In order to arrive at that sort of comprehensive understanding of what faith is we would have to go to a number of other passages in the Bible to see some of the *other* things about faith that are *equally* true.

So, because this *isn't* an exhaustive definition of faith, it raises the question of why the writer of Hebrews has chosen to say *these particular* things about faith. What has influenced the writer's selection process? Why, of all the things that might be said about faith, has the writer emphasized *these things*?

The answer, surely, must be that the writer has emphasized these particular things about faith because they are precisely the sorts of things that the people to whom he is writing need to hear, given their circumstances. This letter has been all about not drifting, about remaining faithful to Jesus, even and especially when you are in challenging, fearful circumstances.

Accordingly, the thing that the writer wants his readers to see about faith is that genuine faith is the kind that keeps believing in things that have only been promised, and not yet realized. It does not cease to function or be real just because there is no visible or even tangible reality present to confirm it. In the midst of their hardship and persecution, the readers of this letter needed to have that kind of faith - i.e., they needed to keep believing and trusting that God's love and concern for them were continuing and real, that the promises and blessings which had been confirmed to them in Jesus were not forgotten or fictional or lost, even if they had not yet fully received them. They needed to remember that there was more to this world and life than meets the eye, that there was another side to what was going on - an unseen side made up of things that were as real as they were *invisible*.

So, that is the *purpose* behind the writer of Hebrews' defining faith as he has - to help his readers to hang on in difficult times by urging them to exercise, and keep exercising, a persevering, hopeful, not-dependent-on-sight sort of faith. That was the sort of faith that their spiritual ancestors - the "people of old" in verse 2 - exhibited, and which resulted in their being commended by God. That was the sort of faith that was needed now by these struggling readers.

Well, after presenting us with this highly selective and purposeful definition of faith, the writer then moves on to provide his readers with various examples of how the sort of faith he is describing worked itself out in the lives of some of their (and our) spiritual forerunners.

In this vein, and as a kind of brief prelude to his review of some specific persons and situations, the writer starts out by making a fairly general observation of how the sort of faith he is describing here plays a part in one of the most fundamental understandings required of all of God's people - namely, his role and work as the Creator and Founder of all things.

It is only by faith that we are able to accept and understand two fundamental things about the origins of the universe itself. Firstly, it is by faith that we understand God's creation of the universe *out of nothing* - i.e., not in the way that Aristotle said - from pre-existent matter - but by bringing into being that which was not before. Secondly, it is by faith that we understand that the creative and generative force behind this bringing-into-

being of things was not some accidental process but the *word of God*. That is, the intentional, deliberate exercise of God's mind-boggling power and authority by which he *speaks into existence* the very stuff of which everything else consists.

Well, after making this initial comment about the way faith plays a part in our most fundamental understandings about the creation and our Creator, the writer of Hebrews then proceeds to very quickly walk his readers through how this same sort of faith functioned in the lives of some significant and well-known Old Testament personalities.

Firstly, in verse 4, we are reminded about the story of Cain and Abel. What is that story? Well, for those that may not know, when you go to Genesis 4 you see this account of an incident in which both Cain and Abel brought offerings to God and how when that happened, God accepted one offering - Abel's - while rejecting the other - Cain's. Now, when you ask the obvious question of *why* God accepted one and not the other, you find that there is no *direct* statement about that in the text. However, there are at least two clues - and some say more - that give us some idea of what the difference was. The first clue we find in the Genesis record. The other clue we find here in Hebrews.

In the Genesis record, we are told that the offering Abel brought was "of the *firstborn* of his flock and of their fat portions" while the offering of Cain's was "*an* offering of the fruit of the ground." In the subtlety of the language used we see a significant difference. The difference was not that one was an animal and the other grain. Because, later on in the Old Testament, there will be *numerous* passages that talk about God's people bringing a *grain offering* to him - an offering that God commanded and was only too happy to receive. Therefore, the issue is not that one is livestock and other is produce.

The issue is one of the heart. We see that both in the Genesis record and in the Hebrews recollection of it. Abel, Moses tells us, brought "of the *firstborn* of his flock and of *their* fat portions." In other words, he brought that which was right off the top, the first productive results of his work, the first evidence that his labors had borne fruit. Further, he brought the best part of those livestock - i.e., the "fat portions" and he brought more than one. Notice that it says "*their*" fat portions. In doing so, Abel had no guarantee that any more livestock might successfully reproduce. He had no way of knowing whether there would be more to follow. Nevertheless, he brought what he had anyway. He did not hold them back. He did not wait to see if any more were on the way. In short, what Abel did required him to have faith, to trust that God would continue to bless him, that what he sacrificed would be replaced, that he was not going to be jamming himself up by doing what he did. That is what the writer of Hebrews means when he says Abel made his offering "by faith."

By contrast, we are told that Cain brought "*an* offering of the fruit of the ground." Now, I believe the lack of qualification with regard to Cain's offering is a telling one. Moses, while making a point of describing Abel's sacrifice as a *firstborn* sacrifice did not say anything about Cain's offering being "the firstfruits" of his harvest. Surely, this is not an accident.

By the language used here Moses, it seems to me, wants us to understand that Cain's offering was *not* of his firstfruits, it was something that happened after the harvest had begun, after he had gathered a certain amount of produce. In other words, responding to God's blessing of his labors was not a *first thought* but was more like an *afterthought*. It was not the same sort of priority for him. As such, what Cain brought did not really require or evidence faith in the way that Abel's sacrifice did.

Well, after hearing about Cain and Abel, we are next told about Enoch - another Old Testament figure about whom we know even less than we do about Cain and Abel. Genesis 5 tells us very little about him other than who he descended from, who he fathered, how long he lived, the fact that he walked with God and the fact that God "took him" - in other words, Enoch did not see death here but was taken directly to heaven by God.

Just as with the account of Cain and Abel, it is the writer of Hebrews that provides us with some additional revelation about Enoch that helps us to know more about him. The main thing we need to know about him, which we might not have seen so clearly apart from Hebrews, is that he too, like Abel, was a man with whom God was pleased.

Now, if Hebrews had stopped right there, without adding anything else, that would have been interesting, to say the least. Because it might well have left us with the impression that what God was so pleased with was Enoch's exemplary life which, I have no doubt, was pleasing to God - as is every example of faithfulness on the part of His people. But what Hebrews 11 tells us here is that God was pleased with Enoch, and then, with what is said in verse 6 the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that the crucial *element* in all of that was Enoch's faith - without which it would have been impossible for him to please God.

The next example that is given is Noah who provides one of the more widely known illustrations of the sort of faith that the writer of Hebrews is talking about. I mean, here he is - this older man - constructing this massive *ship* in the middle of nowhere, on perfectly dry land, far removed from any body of water, years and years in advance of anything ever happening. Why? Because God had commanded him to do so in advance of a coming flood that would be His instrument of judgment on a violent and rebellious humanity. Even though the judgment that God promised was far too distant to even be seen - 120 years away - nevertheless Noah believed, and continued to believe God and wait for everything He said to come to pass.

Finally, the writer of Hebrews holds up the twin examples of Abraham and Sarah - both of whom evidenced the sort of faith being commended here, in their own ways. Abraham left a home and situation that he was familiar and comfortable with for a place he had never seen and a future that he could not possibly envision. Sarah, in spite of her occasional struggles with doubt, in the end came to the place where she did believe and trust God to do what, to anyone but the one with eyes of faith, would have seemed impossible.

So, again, the writer of Hebrews, by appealing to various examples from among their spiritual ancestors, wants his readers to see that the persevering, hopeful sort of faith that he is calling them to - the kind of faith that is confidently assured of things that cannot even be seen - that is the very same sort of faith that God's people have had - and which He has always looked for and expected from his people - since the very beginning of creation itself.

Indeed, the most that any of God's people could say was that they only saw what was promised "from afar." Like Moses, standing on the top of the mountain, straining to see a distant land that he had spent his entire life leading the people of God to - and which now he would never set foot in - that experience is, in reality, the common experience of all of God's people. The ultimate fulfillment of every promise God has given us as his people is always in front of us, somewhere on the other side of a distant valley. We see bits and pieces of it now, tokens of it here and there. But the fullness remains in front of us, and will continue to do so until Jesus comes back.

This, basically, is what the writer of Hebrews is saying in verses 13-16, verses which serve as a sort of summary of the things he has said thus far in chapter 11....

Hebrews 11:13-16 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

One of the things that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to see is that, although their circumstances *are* difficult, they are not *unique* in the sense that trusting God, right up to the very end, even when you have not even begun to realize the fulfillment of the things that God has promised - but that sort of trust and faith is not something unique to the original readers of this letter. It is what has been required of God's people in every age, and in every circumstance. And in saying *that*, the writer of Hebrews shows that he wants his readers to not only know how to respond *in* their situation but also to be able to put their situation in *perspective* - to see that God is not asking of them any more than he has ever asked of his people.

So, it is that the common experience of God's people, in every age, has been to receive and embrace the great truths of the faith that have been passed down to us, including the great promises that attend to those truths - the promises of forgiveness and salvation now, the promise of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the promise of

God's completed renovation of our sinful hearts, the promise of a restored created order, the promise of a bodily resurrection, the promise of a returning Savior, and the promise of eternal life with God in heaven.

All those promises, and more, are the birthright of every one of God's people. But all of those promises are also, as yet, unfulfilled. To be sure, some of them have been *inaugurated* so that we experience the reality of them now - in a partial way - such as the work of the Holy Spirit.

However, some of them are still very much in the future, and we have yet to experience them at any level - such as the bodily resurrection. Nevertheless, the reality is that, whether partially present, or still somewhere in the future, none of the promises are yet *fully* known, or even seen, in our lifetimes. So, as people of faith we, along with our first century brothers and sisters, are *always having to keep leaning forward*, to keep waiting, to keep anticipating the day when God *will* complete the good things He has begun, the day when we will experience fully all that is promised IN the promises.

However, we are not there yet, are we? And because we are not there, because we are not yet who we one day will be, and the creation is not yet restored to what *it* will be, because Jesus has not come back to finish and complete what He has started, because we are not living in our heavenly dwelling - which I think is connected to this whole idea of a renewed creation - but because of all those things our experience here is and frankly, *ought to be*, an *alien* one.

I remember well our first six months in Australia back in 1991. Almost everything we experienced as we were adjusting to life there in the early days was different. Even as we were flying in on the plane, it looked different. The roofs of the houses looked different. The color and shape of the trees was different. The layout of the neighborhoods and suburbs was different. The language spoken was the same certainly - but so many of the words were different, and the accents were very different. The customs were different. The political structures were different. The educational system was different. The houses were different - everything was different. Everything sent this strong signal to us that said, "You're not in Kansas anymore. This is not the life you know. This is not the place that feels like home, i.e., *You are an alien.*"

That experience for us, as missionaries, was really only a shadow of what, in many ways, is and ought to be the experience of every Christian this side of heaven, this side of Jesus coming back, this side of the creation being restored. Everything around us sends this signal that this world is it not the sort of place that it should be. Every person around us is a reminder that people - including ourselves - are not what they are meant to be. Every experience we have sends the signal that things are not going the way they ought to go. In other words, this world is certainly the one we were *born* in, but there is this growing and sneaking suspicion that we don't *belong* here - not like this, not under these conditions, not with these sorrows, not with these longings.

I think I have previously talked to you about the movie *Waterworld*, by Kevin Costner which, overall, was a pretty ridiculous piece of futuristic nonsense and a colossal waste of money. Nevertheless, in spite of its abundant flaws, there was at least one redeeming moment in the movie. The story, in a nutshell, is about a world that is completely covered in water, and which has been that way for as long as anyone can remember. Everyone lives on these massive artificial islands. The main character is a guy known as “the Mariner,” played by Costner, who is this burned-out, cynical, half-human, half-amphibious, extremely reluctant hero. Anyway, at a crucial point in the movie he rescues this woman and, I think a child, and takes them on board his boat. Subsequently, the woman begins to talk to the Mariner about this place she has heard of called “dry land.” She wants to know if he has heard of it and, in response, the Mariner dismisses the idea, insisting that no such place exists. So in the movie “dry land” serves as a kind of metaphor of heaven that is believed by some, and doubted by most.

Anyway, the woman is a true believer in “dry land” and the faithless Mariner, after he has had enough of hearing about “dry land” lashes out at the woman and says, “What makes you so sure that there IS a dry land? How do you know it even exists?” - to which the woman responds, holding up her hands and saying, “*Look at us. Look at the way we are. We weren’t made to live in the sea. We weren’t meant to live in a place like this. We were meant for something different.*”

That scene was almost worth the price of the movie.

However, the woman’s response is one that might sound very similar coming from the lips of God’s people. Because that is the very same sort of conclusion that we have come to as true believers ourselves. There *is* something better. We *were not* meant to live in a world like this, with hearts like ours, under these sorts of conditions. We were and ARE meant for something else. Something better.

Just as Abraham lived out his life as a stranger and alien - even when he was in the land of promise itself - so too did the writer of Hebrews expect his readers to live, with similar conviction and resolve. He expected them to understand that they too were aliens here, seeking a better country. He wanted them to see that the plundering of their possessions and the loss of their land and even homes, while difficult, was not the end of the world. He expected them to have the same sort of perspective on the things of this world as their forefathers had. He expected them to live in *faith*, without receiving the promises, but only seeing them from afar. He expected them to look upon their hardships with that same, practiced eye that understands that God *is* merciful and kind and *does* care for his people, but which also understands that this side of Christ’s return we ought to expect that we will regularly experience the fallen-ness and broken-ness of this world, that we will continue to be as *sinned against* as we are sinner ourselves.

That same expectation that held for the original readers of this letter holds for you and me today. We are to live as aliens in this world, putting our hopes in a life and future that we cannot see, and in a place we have never been too. That does not mean that

we have to live in tents. Nevertheless, it does mean that we live in ways that are congruent with the things we profess. It means we are not taken in by the things that the rest of the world worships. It means that we take steps and put into place things that will protect us from our own hearts - especially when it comes to material things. We choose to live in ways that will not nurture our worldliness, but which, instead, will suffocate it. It means we are not paralyzed by the fear of what might happen if we lost it all. It means that we are learning to treasure Jesus - more than any earthly treasure - with the inevitable generosity of spirit that seems to result from all such pursuits.

The reality of our having and living with this perspective is seen not only in our choices and lifestyle decisions - it shows up in our *speech*. Look again at verses 15 and 16:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having **acknowledged** that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who **speak** thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

Not only have God's people distinguished themselves by *living* as aliens, but they have also *acknowledged* and *spoken* about these things. In other words, they had so completely bought into the reality of their passing relationship to this world that it became part of their conversation, part of how they talked with other people about their lives, part of how they verbalized and narrated their own lives.

As we bring this study to a close, I want you to know that this is my prayer for you and me. That we would so identify with the reality of our being aliens and strangers here that it begins to shape the way we think and the way we speak to others. That our language will be an overflow of this reality that is slowly permeating our hearts and minds. Even more, it is my prayer that as our hearts and minds and speech are more and more captivated by Christ, and more reflective of this same spirit that we see in our spiritual forefathers, we will become instruments in God's hand by which he uses us to encourage *other* believers in these things - that God will use us to inspire one another to a deeper abandonment to the Kingdom of God.

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