

THE REALITY OF FAITH

Ben Janssen | Hebrews 11:1-3 | September 8, 2019

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ 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.

This summer we went on a family vacation in Florida and made a stop at Universal Studios. They've got this roller coaster there, *The Incredible Hulk*. I've never been on a roller coaster before where you had to first pass through a metal detector to ensure you weren't carrying a cell phone or keys which could fall out of your pocket.

I tried to get on the ride with my cell phone. Had it in a pocket that was buttoned-down. No way it could come out. But it didn't matter. They wouldn't let me on with it. Didn't matter how securely you thought it might be on your person. This ride could easily dislodge them from your possession. This must be quite the ride.

I told Heather she would have to ride without me as I prepared to leave the line. But the ride personnel told me to go put it in a locker and I could come right back to my place in line. I was kind of hoping this would be my excuse not to get on the ride at all. Honestly, I was a bit nervous about the whole thing.

But Heather and I rode it. And, wow! Best coaster I've ever been on. I commend it to you if you ever get the chance to ride it.

Now all of that has happened since the last time we studied the book of Hebrews together. It's been a while, so as we get back into our study, let's remember a few key things. First, the author of Hebrews is anonymous, but since the style of this biblical book is a written sermon, we are referring to him as the "Preacher." Second, he is writing this book to encourage and exhort professing Christians who are increasingly coming under pressure to renounce some or all of their beliefs about Christianity. We ended our last study in chapter ten, where the Preacher was urging his readers to not "throw away [their] confidence" since it promises such a great reward (Heb 10:35). Perseverance in the faith is a requirement for all those who will receive the great promises of God's gospel (Heb 10:36).

And the Preacher is certain that his audience is among those "who have faith and preserve their souls" (Heb 10:39). He is certain that they stand with the congregation of the faithful. They possess the same faith as their spiritual ancestors. He sees in them this same faith.

And so we come to chapter 11 of Hebrews, a well-known chapter in the Bible, often referred to as "the Hall of Fame of Faith." Here we find example after example of God's righteous ones who lived by faith. We're planning on spending five weeks on this famous chapter, but before we can get into the stories of these heroes of the faith, we must consider these three introductory verses. What the Preacher does here is clarify for us something about the nature of this faith that he intends to highlight in the lives of our spiritual ancestors. In a desire for the church to move onward in the

faith, the Preacher first informs us that faith does three things: it reveals, inspires, and comprehends.

FAITH REVEALS

First, in verse one we are told something very foundational about the nature of biblical faith. This is something that is so incredibly misunderstood that we need to get this right if we're going to get the Christian gospel right. Biblical faith is not something hidden, private, subjective. It is seen. It is public. And it is objective. Faith does not conceal. It reveals.

A Doubtful Translation

Let's clarify something important about Hebrews 11:1. This verse is not intended to give us a definition of faith. Paul Ellingworth writes that, given the context of the entire chapter, we should see verse one as summarizing what faith does rather than what faith is.¹

The meaning of verse one is complicated by a bit of church history. When Martin Luther was translating the Bible into German, he wrestled with how to translate one particular Greek word in verse one. He finally decided to render it with the German word for "confidence," and when he did, he introduced an entirely new idea into the meaning of this verse.² It's an idea that is so popular, most English versions continue to translated along the same lines. So the ESV reads, "Now faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for." Whether we read "assurance" or "confidence" here, such readings most certainly are incorrect.

The KJV and the CSB are more accurate. Faith is the "substance" (KJV) or the "reality" (CSB) of things hoped for. Do you see the difference? Faith is not a subjective assurance or confidence of what we cannot be assured of by objective evidence. Rather, faith here is said to do something. It gives substance to what cannot be seen. In other words, it reveals.

The Invisible Made Visible

We can demonstrate and illustrate this point by considering the two other places this Greek word is found in Hebrews. We first saw it in Hebrews 1:3. In describing the Son of God, we are told that Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. That last word, *nature*, is the word used here in Hebrews 11:1.

So think about who Jesus is. He is an exact replica, an "imprint" of the nature of God. And that's why we say that Jesus *is* God. He possesses the exact same nature. He is of the same substance.

We have to be told this, of course, because the Son also took on the same substance as you and me. He also possessed the human substance, the human nature. But in doing so he did not abandon the divine nature. Rather, as John tells us, the Word who was God took on flesh and became man so that we might see the glory of God (Jn 1:14). In Jesus, God became visible and public. In this way, Jesus revealed God to us. He showed us God (Jn 14:9).

Now this is what is said about faith in Hebrews 11:1. It reveals something to us by making visible what is invisible. Faith, we are told, is the substance of things hoped for. The next phrase is parallel to the first, and the word “conviction” means an objective demonstration “of things not seen.”³ So, far from being some subjective “confidence” or “assurance” of something you can’t see or prove, the Preacher is saying that faith is concerned with making things clearer, more apparent, more objective. William Lane says, “It is the task of faith to make unseen reality as real as that which is seen with the human eye.”⁴

Ordinary Faith

Let’s put this in perspective, then, with what we are going to encounter in Hebrews 11. What we are going to find are examples, objective, historical examples, of faith. We’re going to see what faith looks like. But, in seeing faith in this way, we are supposed to see beyond faith. The examples of faith in Hebrews 11 are not there to inspire us to do hard things, things that require “faith.” They are there to inspire us to do hard things precisely because of a reality that cannot be seen but nevertheless is truly there.

You see, these hard things are not always dramatic things. The revelatory nature of faith also means it is quite paradoxical. Just like the reality of the transcendent God was seen in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, so the great realities of God’s coming kingdom are here now, to be seen, in the community of faith.⁵ What cannot be seen may be extraordinary, but it is often revealed to us in that which seems rather ordinary.

So what does faith do? It reveals reality, a reality which is not yet seen because they have not yet come to pass. They are still to come, but they are sure and certain. So faith makes it plain that they are sure and certain by causing us to act in accordance with that invisible reality now.

FAITH INSPIRES

This leads us then to verse two, and notice that it is to be read along with verse one, since it begins with the conjunction “for.” We find here supporting evidence that faith is revelatory, that it makes more apparent to the eyes what is otherwise unseen. Faith is the reality of what is hoped for because it was by living in accordance with faith that “the people of old received their commendation.” So faith not only reveals, it also inspires.

God’s Commendation

It inspires because in recounting the stories of the faith of these “people of old,” God commends them to us as examples of what living by faith might look like.

And so the Preacher is going to do the same thing. Through the use of a rhetorical technique called the *exempla*, he is going to give example after example after example of what a life of faith looks like so that by the end of the chapter we will all be saying, “That’s how you do it. That’s what it means to live by faith. And that’s how we ought to live.”⁶

It's the same power, the same effect, of a good biography. It's meant to inspire us to live in similar ways. But, if you are an author, who would you choose to write a biography about? You would choose someone extraordinary, someone who did something commendable. We don't read biographies of those who did nothing remarkable with their lives.

But God has taken up his pen and written some biographies he wants us to read. And God is a brilliant author, so we take note of the biographies he has published for us to read.

Ordinary Heroes

So whose stories did he choose to tell? Well, some of them have some really remarkable stories. Others have rather tragic stories. And some of the names found on here are confusing since it would seem they did anything but live by faith. But God commends them all to us.

And you know why? Because these folks are folks just like us. They had the same kinds of weaknesses and sins and even faithlessness that you and I have.

And this is the point of faith's commendation. It would be easy for us to think that "great faith" requires us to be people of strong conviction and endurance. People who are unflappable, determined, and persistent. But not God's "heroes." These are some pretty flawed people, but they are recorded here and commended to us for just this purpose, to encourage us that it is possible for even the weakest believer among us "to sustain steadfast commitment to God."⁷ The point is to say, if they can do it, you can do it, too. People of biblical faith are extraordinary, they are commendable, not because of the faith they express but because of the one in whom they place their faith.

Easy Faith, Hard Faith

You see, God commends these examples of faith to us precisely because he expects the same kind of faith from us. Faith is commended to us, and we should recognize that it is both easy and hard, all at the same time.

It is easy because faith, before it can be said to be something we do, must be understood first to be something we are given. Theologian Kelly Kapic says, "Faith, like love, cannot be commanded, but only received, experienced, and lived out."⁸ We don't conjure up faith; the object of our faith must logically precede the faith which rests upon it.

Remember, faith, from a biblical perspective, is objective. So if the object in which faith rests does not actually exist, then there can be no faith. Faith, like love, requires an object. You can't believe in nothing any more than you can say you love nothing.

And yet, faith is really, really hard because you also can't half-faith something. True faith, like true love, has to be all or nothing. Kapic writes, "Our active faith humbles us and trusts the radical humility of God. Such faith requires everything we are, all our trust, all our hope, all our life."⁹

Kapic illustrates this from one of the closing scenes in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* as he closes in on the Holy Grail.

The final challenge is a great chasm that looks bottomless and impassable. But Indiana has his father's research notebook that tells him that he must step out in faith. It's a tense moment where he closes his eyes, sticks out his foot, and steps forward into the abyss. Just when you think he will tumble to certain death, his foot hits solid ground, and he finds himself on an invisible rock bridge, allowing a safe crossing.

Kapic observes, "Indiana had to trust in the work of his father (as do we), and he had to believe. It wasn't easy. It took everything he had to step out like that."¹⁰ But wouldn't that have been exhilarating, to risk it all and find it all to be very true, very real?

Faith is scary. Like getting on the *Incredible Hulk* roller coaster. It's hard. Plenty of people won't take the risk. But God's commendation tells us that faith is worth the risk. is worth taking it. Others have done it. And you can, too.

FAITH COMPREHENDS

Of course, Kapic reminds us, "the greatest risk of faith is that it might not be true."¹¹ But faith does not require us to believe against all evidence. Faith is very much concerned with evidence. Faith, true faith, has to rest on reality. So it is very concerned with facts, with evidence. In fact, this brings us to the last thing that we are told that faith does. Not only does it reveal and not only does it inspire, but faith also comprehends. Verse three says it: "By faith we understand."

Faith and Epistemology

How can we know, understand things "by faith"? This is the major problem that skeptics have with faith. They say you cannot know things by faith. Phrases like "sometimes you just have to take things on faith" suggests that when you have run out of evidence, when you are left only with guessing and pure speculation, that's when faith kicks in.

But the Bible will have none of this. The Holy Scriptures are very much concerned with truth, and with our knowing the truth. To live by faith is of course contrasted with living by sight (2 Cor 5:7), but this is not a contrast between truth and fiction, between knowledge based on evidence and beliefs based on pure speculation.

Rather, the Bible tells us that we need faith to know, to comprehend, because without faith our knowledge is compromised. Our epistemology, our way of knowing true things, depends upon faith.

The Fallibility of the Mind

Here's why. The human mind is amazing; the Bible explains why we have human genius. It's because we are made in the image of God. We have been given brains that are brilliant machines of knowledge and understanding by the good design of our Creator. And he expects us to use these minds.

But, as we all know, the human mind can be wrong. It can be deceived. And it can miscalculate in all sorts of ways. The Bible explains this, too. It tells us of the Fall caused by human sin that has

affected every single aspect of our being. This includes our thinking and reasoning, the *noetic* effects of the Fall. It doesn't mean we can't get anything right anymore, but it does mean we cannot get along by only our minds and by what we can discern by them.

We can trust our minds, but not exclusively. What we need is the mind of God, and this is precisely what we have in the Scriptures. To live by faith is to trust in what God has revealed to us in the Bible. Real, objective chapter-and-verse revelation. We have to trust the Bible. The only other choice is to trust our own minds which have proven themselves all too often to be quite fallible.

Comprehending the Beginning

So, for example, we who trust the Bible understand something that those who rely solely on their minds do not. We know the answer to one of life's greatest puzzles. It's the question about the origin of the universe. Where did it come from? We know: "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God." It's right there, in the third verse of our Bibles. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). And so, it's right there in our Creed, at the very beginning: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, *maker of heaven and earth.*"

While skeptical scientists keep trying to explain everything without God, Christian scientists seek to explain everything starting with God. Yes, this means science begins with faith, but that does not make faith a knowledge stopper. On the contrary; it leads to even more curiosity. We believe that "This is my Father's world," and this does not lead us to pose "God" everywhere that there is no other explanation. Rather, it leads us to pose "God" everywhere that there *is* an explanation.

*This is my Father's world,
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.*

We don't see God merely where there are gaps. We see him in every place, and in wonder we say, "Tell us more about this world you have made!" It is this mindset, this faith mindset, that motivates education and research.

The Logic of Faith

Faith in the Scriptures is not contradictory to evidence, even if it does challenge at times what seems to be settled matters of knowledge. Indeed, it is by believing the Scriptures that we can come to some of the greatest examples of logical reasoning. For example, William Lane Craig demonstrates the logical argument of a personal Creator by arguing for this syllogism:

Whatever begins to exist has a cause;
The universe began to exist;
Therefore, the universe has a cause.

And, he goes on to demonstrate, that this cause must be an uncaused, personal Creator who is beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless and enormously powerful."¹²

The late American atheist philosopher Michael Martin, while rejecting Craig’s argument, admitted that this kind of reasoning is “among the most sophisticated and well argued in contemporary theological philosophy.”¹³

But again, we do not come to these kinds of conclusions from the mind alone. We learn it first from believing the Bible. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

Into the Invisible Future

In the same way that the visible present came out of the invisible past, so we move on from the visible present into the invisible future. This is what it means to live by faith. You’ve done it before, if you accept the argument of the Creation, you must keep on doing it. There is no other way to live. The future may be invisible, but it is real. It is reality.

And so is the faith by which we comprehend the future. Hebrews 11 invites us to join this communion of saints. It is within this fellowship that God normally extends his gift of faith to us, uniting us to himself and to each other.¹⁴ It is this faith which reveals reality which is not seen, inspires us to move onward, and makes us able to comprehend the world we presently inhabit.

¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), [566](#).

² Helmut Köster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–74), [8:586](#).

³ [Ibid.](#)

⁴ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), [325](#).

⁵ Köster, *TDNT*, [587](#).

⁶ George H. Guthrie, *NT361 Book Study: The Letter to the Hebrews*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), [n.p.](#)

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, [330](#).

⁸ Kelly M. Kopic, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 90.

⁹ [Ibid.](#), 92.

¹⁰ [Ibid.](#)

¹¹ [Ibid.](#), 93.

¹² See William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 102, 194.

¹³ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 101.

¹⁴ Kopic, *God So Loved*, 89.