

Hebrews 11:1-7

“What is Faith?”

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Epiphany Season

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 11:1-7. It also printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there. I’m actually going to start reading at the end of chapter 10 in verse 32 to provide some context.

*32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 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. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For,*

*“Yet a little while,*

*and the coming one will come and will not delay;*

*38 but my righteous one shall live by faith,*

*and if he shrinks back,*

*my soul has no pleasure in him.”*

*39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

*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.*

*4 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. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Over the past six months or so, I've been doing some reading on the Potato famine in Ireland in the late 1840s. I've read two long novels and one work on history on this topic.

If you don't know anything about it, the Irish Potato Famine is a pretty harrowing story. At the time, Ireland was essentially a colony of the British Empire, and all the farmland was owned by British lords, who employed poor Irish peasants to raise their crops and watch over the flocks.

In exchange for their work, the peasants were leased tiny plots of land to raise potatoes, which is what they lived on - their diet was literally almost entirely potatoes throughout the year.

It was a terrible system for the peasants - they had no chance of improving their life or purchasing land or doing anything other than working for the wealthy landowners, but they were at least able to survive and scratch out an existence.

But in 1845, the potato crops in Ireland were struck by a mysterious blight and began to fail. And it continued.

The potato crop failed for the next six or seven years. And so the only means of sustenance available to the Irish peasants disappeared overnight.

The wealthy landowners did not exactly take pity on their employees. They kept growing their crops of wheat and raising cattle and sheep and shipping everything to England, where it could be sold for a profit. Their lives didn't change at all. They had plenty to eat and their estates remained profitable.

Meanwhile, the Irish peasants were on their own. And without their little plots of potatoes that kept them alive, they starved by the thousands.

The stories I've read have been of almost unimaginable suffering - peasants evicted from their shacks because they couldn't pay the unjust rents charged, whole families starving together, eating the most terrible things in order to just get enough calories to just barely stay alive.

It is estimated that at least one million Irish peasants died of starvation and disease in those five years that started in 1845, out of a population of eight million, and at least another million left their country forever, emigrating primarily to the United States, but also to Canada, Australia, Scotland and England.

My interest in this time period is personal, because my ancestors lived through it - my great-great-great-grandfather, William Anderson, was born in County Mayo, Ireland around the year 1812, and emigrated with his wife Mary to Richmond, Virginia in the early 1850s because of the potato famine, where he joined St. Peter's Church, had my great-great grandfather baptized after his birth in Virginia, and found employment at the recently established iron works by the James River.

And as I've read these different books, I've wondered what his experience was like.

What horrors did the man whose name I bear today experience during those years? How did he stay alive? What did he have to do?

How did he come to the decision to leave his homeland with his wife to come to the United States?

How did he scrape together the money necessary to find a spot in the hold of one of those wooden ships that crossed the Atlantic during those years?

I don't know the answers to those questions, and I probably never will this side of eternity.

But reading these books and thinking about these things have given me a deeper sense of the story that I belong to - a story of courage and perseverance and poverty and suffering and Christian faith - faith that compelled William Anderson to leave his homeland and go to a new place on the other side of a gigantic ocean and trust that God would indeed take care of him and his family there.

And of course, my knowledge of that deeper story that I belong to provides a new context for my own life today - the challenges I face, the places in my life where I need to have courage and persevere and embrace suffering and have faith.

In many way, this kind of family history narration what the Apostle is doing for us here in Hebrews 11.

He is describing for us the story that we belong to - the story of those who have gone before us, and what it means for us today, in the year of our Lord 2022, to belong to an ancient tribe of people who have held to faith in the living God for thousands of years.

This is without a doubt the most well-known chapter in Hebrews, and indeed, one of the most famous chapters in all of the New Testament.

But to understand it rightly, we really need to read it in the context of the flow of the overall argument of the epistle.

Remember, at the end of Hebrews 10, the apostle is exhorting his readers to persevere in their faith despite the difficulty of following Jesus in their present context.

He says that they have experienced recently *“a hard struggle with sufferings,”* which has included being subjected to public reproach and affliction, and when they had compassion on another group of believers who had been imprisoned for their faith, they themselves suffered the plundering of their property.

This group of believers have suffered greatly. They have been mocked and ridiculed and ostracized publicly by those in power, and now recently they have lost their homes, their possessions, their wealth.

But the Apostle does not hesitate to call them to perseverance. He reminds them that they endured the loss of their property with joy, because they they had a better possession and an abiding one because of the union with Jesus.

And then, after quoting from the words of God himself, who taught the prophet Habakkuk during the time of the Babylonian invasions of Judah that the *“righteous shall live by faith,”* the apostle writes these words at the very end of Hebrews chapter 10:

*39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

This is who you are, the Apostle is saying, both to his original readers, and to us as well: you are a part of the people who have faith. This is your tribe. This is who you are.

You are not part of the people shrink back and experience destruction, no - you are part of those people who, no matter what their circumstances, cling to God through faith and remain steadfast.

And it is this context that the Apostle writes Hebrews chapter 11, which describes what these people of faith are like - who they are, what they believe - what their faith cost them, and what treasures they gained by it.

But what is faith? That's where the Apostle starts in this chapter, in our passage this morning.

And I think the primary thing he's arguing about faith in these seven verses is that faith is nothing more and nothing less than living as though the promises of God are worth counting on.

I think sometimes we can make faith out to be this really complicated and mysterious thing. But faith is actually pretty simple.

*Faith is living as though the promises of God are worth counting on.*

Listen to the definition of faith that the Apostle gives in verses 1-2 and then expands in verse 6.

*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.*

*6 And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

Faith, the apostle makes clear, is counting on something you can't see, something you're hoping for that hasn't fully happened yet.

But faith isn't just some generic belief in things that are unseen.

As verse 6 shows us, faith means believing that God exists, that God eternally is, and that the God who is also rewards those that seek him.

In other words, to have faith in God means not only believing that God exists, but believing also that God has made promises to those who have put their trust in him, and he will keep those promises and reward those who have faith in him.

That is to say, there is a deeply relational element to faith.

Faith is putting your chips in on someone - specifically on God and his promises and believing God will deliver on those promises one day - and even if you're imprisoned or lose your property or suffer death, you can joyfully accept those things - because one day, the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also raise you from the dead and give you all that he has promised you.

It might sound like there's an element of self-interest involved with this Apostolic definition of faith, and I want to clear up any ambiguity and say yes - that's exactly what is happening here.

The Apostle is saying - to please God means to trust that he exists and that he also rewards those who seek him.

The Apostle is saying that we shouldn't just have faith because it's the "right" thing to do, morally speaking, no we should be people of faith because we believe that if we seek God, God *will* reward us in the end.

The Apostle James makes a very similar argument in his epistle when he writes: "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*"

God doesn't just promise moral improvement to those who have faith and remain steadfast.

No, God promises *crowns* to those who love him. He promises eternal life. He promises staggering rewards to those who seek him - such that any loss we suffer in this life because of our faith in him is no real loss at all.

That's the language of Paul. That's the language of James. That's the language of the Apostle who wrote Hebrews.

And you'll notice by means of these first examples in our passage this morning —Abel, Enoch and Noah— that to be part of the people of faith doesn't just mean holding some kind of intellectual commitment to God's existence.

No, to be a person who has faith means we actually live as though the promises of God are worth counting on.

To be a person of faith is to live as though the promises of God are worth it. You can tell whether a person has faith not just by the words they use, but by the decisions they make.

Abel offered a sacrifice of the best of his flocks. Enoch lived a life of righteousness in a time of great sin. Noah spent years building an ark in the middle of a dry land.

These men of faith didn't just believe the promises of God - they lived as though they were true.

But the Apostle wants us not only to see that faith is living as though the promises of God are worth counting on.

The apostle also wants us to see that to have faith means to take your place in the story of those men and women who have lived in this way since the beginning of time.

I think it's fascinating that the Apostle begins his story of the people of faith with creation.

In verse 3, he writes: *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.*

And then, in verse 4, the Apostle tells us the story of one of the first human beings to ever live. This story of the people who lived as though the promises of God are worth counting on is an ancient story, as ancient as ancient gets.

This story of faith that we are a part of goes back to the beginning of time itself.

*4 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.*

God commended Abel for his faith, because he rightly offered the best of his flocks to God, sacrificial animals which bled to atone for his sins, even as God had himself killed an animal in response to the sin of Adam and Eve.

And Abel himself, of course, also bled for his faith, as his brother Cain murdered him in the field in his envy and rage.

Abel was the first human person in history to ever die, and because he died, he is where our ancient story begins, because he died in faith.

And even now, the Apostle instructs us, Abel's voice still speaks from beyond the grave, as his soul waits, by faith, for the resurrection of the dead.

The apostle then goes on to describe two other ancient stories of faith - Enoch, who lived a life pleasing to God in the midst of a world of sin, and was taken up by God without seeing death, and Noah, who believed the unseen word of God that promised judgment in the flood and built an ark so that his faith might be rewarded by the salvation of his household.

These men also believed in the unseen promise of God and trusted that he would reward them as they sought him. And so they too become part of the great story.

I want to close with this.

Beloved, as you meditate on this passage this morning, you need to know that in choosing to live by faith, in choosing to believe and count on and trust in the unseen promises of God, you are stepping into a story that is greater than yourself.

I know that each of one of us, there are challenges to our faith right now. How could it be any other way? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.

A fundamental assumption of faith is that God has not yet fully done what he has promised to do - and so faith means living with the tension of waiting for the unseen to become visible, for the hoped for future to become our actual present reality.

Abel knew that tension. Enoch knew that tension. Noah knew it well, all those years that he gathered the wood and carved the planks and constructed the ark for a flood that he could barely even begin to imagine.

But, beloved, when you faithfully cling to the Living God and trust him to provide all that he has promised you, when you live in that tension and keep seeking God because you trust he will indeed reward you, you are participating in something glorious.

You are participating in the most ancient story that there is.

This story of faith did not begin with you. And it will not end with you.

Your faith, in some way, is made plausible, is made confident, by those who have gone before you, those like Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah who have made the same decision you have made.

Their faith, practiced thousands of years ago, in some strange way, becomes a foundation for your faith today. They knew the same tension. They bore the same cost. They looked for the same reward that you do today.

And there's a promise here as well. As the Apostle tells us regarding Abel, though we die, through our faith, we still continue to speak to the living who come after us.

There's a promise that, in having faith in the Living God, we get to be part of a story that didn't just start long before us at the beginning of time - it stretches out into the future as well.

Your faith, if you persevere in it, this chapter teaches us, is not just for you. It's also for those who come after you. Your faith is for your children, and your grandchildren, and their children as well.

In some fundamental way, my own faith today is connected to the faith of my ancestor I never met, William Anderson, who trusted that God would take care of him when he took his wife's hand and climbed down the

ladder into the dark belly of a wooden ship to cross a dangerous ocean to go to a land he had never seen.

And my faith today, in a similar way, lays a foundation for those who come after me, those descendants I will never meet, but who I hope one day will say - I had a great-great-great grandfather who pastored a little church in Texas in the first part of the 21st century. I don't know much about his life. But I know that he had faith in God, and though he died, he still speaks.

Friends, this is what is offered to us in a life of faith. The opportunity to be part of the only story—the only story—that truly lasts in this world.

The opportunity to joyfully trade everything we own for a better possession which abides forever. The opportunity to die and yet continue to speak. The opportunity to receive commendation and reward from God - even the crown of life that he will give to those who love him.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.