

The Perfecter of Our Faith
Hebrews 11 – 12:2
April 24, 2016

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.² This is what the ancients were commended for.³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.⁸ By faith 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.²³ By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. ³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 11-12:2 (NIV)

By Faith!” This is by far the most well known part of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. In fact, before this series if you were to ask someone what they knew about the *Letter to the Hebrews* they probably would have referred to some or part of this passage – the great passage on Faith. The author even starts out by giving us the biblical definition of faith –

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see
Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
Hebrews 11:1 (KJV)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)

One of the ancient Greek literary tools was the author repeating something with basically the same meaning with just a little twist. Many believe that is what we have here in the first verse. Two things with pretty much the same meaning:

Confidence in what we hope for – assurance about what we do not see.
The substance of things hoped for – the evidence of things not seen.
The assurance of things hoped for – the conviction of things not seen.

The biblical definition of faith is much greater than just mere hope as we often understand hope. To the writer of *Hebrews* faith is a hope that is certain, that what one believes is true, and that what one expects to happen in the future will come to fruition. The 20th century New Testament Commentary writer William Barclay wrote on this verse – Christian faith “is not the hope which takes refuge in a perhaps; it is the hope which is founded on a conviction... The Christian hope is more than hope; it is a hope that has turned to certainty.”

Barclay goes on, “this Christian hope is such that it dictates all of a man or woman’s conduct. It dominates his or her actions. He or she lives in this hope and dies in this hope and is in possession of this hope which makes he or she act as they do.”

Faith is also much more than mere belief. Faith is belief that leads to action. The New Living Translation of 11:1 captures that:

Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.
Hebrews 11:1 (NLT)

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.
Hebrews 11:1 (*The Message*)

One of the other great Bible commentators of the early 20th century, James Moffatt points out three distinctives in which this faith or hope as defined by the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* operates:

1. Christian faith is belief in God against the world.

“If we follow the world’s standards we may well have ease and comfort and prosperity; if we follow God’s standards we may well have pain and loss and discomfort and unpopularity, and we may well have to give up the world’s prizes.”

The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, while specifically pointing it out in describing Noah’s faith, “that by his faith Noah condemned the world”(v. 7), by extension he was describing it as an element of all the others great faith.

While we don’t like to confront it today, because it isn’t forced upon us like it is upon many Christians throughout the world, the conviction of Christian faith and hope is that it is better to suffer with God, and even to die with God, than to prosper with the world. In the book of Daniel (chapter 3), Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego are confronted with the choice of obeying King Nebuchadnezzar and worshipping his message or obeying God and entering the burning, fiery furnace. Without any hesitation they chose God. Is our faith in God so strong that we would be willing to do that today if put in the same position?

2. The second distinction of Christian faith and hope is the belief in the Word of God and the Holy Spirit against our human senses – our emotions and feelings.

Our senses tell us to take what we want now! Take what you can touch and taste and feel and enjoy. The senses tell us to grasp the things of the moment, that which is easily attainable. The Christian believes in the reward at the end and trusts in the Word of God and the Holy Spirit over that which our senses, emotions and feelings tell us.

3. The third distinction of Christian faith and hope is belief in the future against the present.

On the one hand, what looks good and feels good to us now may bring long term pain down the road and even separation from God for all eternity. On the other hand, that which might bring immense pain now may bring everlasting joy and eternal life with God. In the moment it appeared that Pontius Pilate had crushed Jesus of Nazareth, he whom many believed was the long awaited and promised Messiah; but the verdict of the future reversed the verdict of the moment.

The writer then goes on to highlight and describe the lives of all the great heroes of the faith. We certainly don't have the time to go over all of them individually. This is one of the passages of Scripture that speaks for itself. It was precisely because each of them lived out of those three biblical distinctives that they were attested to and approved by God for their faith.

As William Barclay points out in his commentary, "Every one of them refused the greatness of what the world calls a great career, refused the safety of what the world calls a safe decision, and staked everything on God – and history proved them right." True Christian faith and hope is not just an assumption; it is a certainty which is backed by the evidence of history.

The writer of this *Letter to the Hebrews* goes a step further. He says that it is even an act of faith to believe that God created the world, that He spoke it into existence, "formed at God's command" (v.3), and that it was created out of nothing. The author of this letter was directly contradicting what many believed in that day – that God created the world out of already existing matter.

If that was an issue way back then, how much more so today? Even our Christian faith today starts with the belief and faith that God is God, that He existed before the world ever existed and that He created it out of nothing. That He spoke it into existence.

Biblical faith creates a problem for all those who need proof of everything, that we can be all knowing, that education will provide all the answers, that we need scientific evidence. Not that any of those things in and of themselves are bad things, but they can be great stumbling blocks to Christian faith.

We have three Distinctives of Christian/biblical faith, and we also have three essentials, I'll call them the three T's.

Three T's (Essentials) of Christian faith:

1. Take God at his word

Many of those in our list of the great fathers and mothers of our faith heard directly from the mouth of God. That is not the case for many others and certainly not the case for us today. How do we know God's word? Well, it has been revealed to us in Scripture. We can either take God at his word or not.

2. Turn from the world

Turning from the world doesn't mean we take ourselves out of the world, but that we recognize the world for what it is. Jesus' great priestly prayer that he offered in John 17 – *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one* [while they are in the world].

3. Trust in Jesus

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2a (NIV)

Verse 6 of chapter 11 says, *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

You see, the writer of this *Letter to the Hebrews*, whoever it might have been, is trying to inspire new courage and a new sense of responsibility by making his readers and hearers remember the great men and women of the past.

As William Barclay points out in his commentary:

“This is one of the great, moving passages of the New Testament; and in it the writer to the Hebrews has given us a perfect summary of the Christian life.”

So, we have three distinctives of Christian faith, three essentials of Christian Faith and William Barclay give us six elements of the Christian Life:

1. In the Christian life we have a goal.

The Christian life is a race along a course that is set out before us. It is not a sprint but a marathon, one in which we have confidence and faith in the desired end but not how the course is going to be from where we are right now until we get to that desired end. The Christian is a pilgrim or a sojourner on the way.

2. In the Christian life we have an inspiration.

We have this unseen cloud of great witnesses. They are witnesses in a double sense: 1) they too had to live their life in faith – that which was pointing towards Christ; and 2) now they are witnesses to our performance. Barclay says it's like we now are running our races of faith in a crowded stadium and all those in the stands are those who have gone before us, they're all rooting us on, and they're going to be there when we cross the finish line.

On the Christian journey we have a goal, we have an inspiration, and

3. We all have a handicap. It's as if, in this race of the Christian life, we are all competing in the "Special Olympics."

While we might be encircled by this great cloud of witnesses, we are also encircled by the handicap of our own sin and the brokenness which is all around us. No man or woman can reach greatness while burdened down. It would be like trying to climb Mount Everest with a load of lumber on your back. The same is true of our Christian faith journey. If we want to travel far and we want to reach our destination, then we must travel light. We must discard things. The author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* says we must discard the sin which so easily entangles. But it is also much more than just discarding our sin.

If we want to finish the race of our Christian faith journey well, then we need to discard lots of things. It's more than just discarding our sin. We may need to discard bad habits, pleasures, possessions, relationships with others, even our natural, carnal selves. We need to discard anything and everything that is holding us back. Whatever is holding us back and weighing us down must go, and we often need the help of Christ to enable us to let it go.

William Barclay goes on:

4. In the Christian life we have a means. That means is patient endurance, something that we talked about earlier in this series. Again, the race of our Christian faith journey is a long marathon, not a sprint.
5. In the Christian life we have an example. That example is Jesus Himself.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For the goal that was set before him, He endured all things. To win the goal that was set before Jesus, he had to abandon heaven's glory for a period of time. He had to leave heaven to come down to earth. To win the goal he had to refuse earth's rewards. To win that goal he had to go the way of the cross. To win the goal it says he had to scorn (despise) the cross's shame.

Barclay makes a very interesting observation in his commentary. Jesus was the most sensitive and compassion filled person to ever walk this earth. How hard it must have been for him to have been rejected by the people whom he had come to save. In the day, not only was the cross one of the most treacherous ways to die, it was also one of the most humiliating. It was the end for criminals, those who were considered the dregs of humanity. And yet Jesus accepted the journey that was set before him to reach the goal, to win the prize. If Jesus had to endure such suffering, humiliation, and persecution – why do we think we will not?

On the journey of our Christian faith not only do we have Jesus' example but we also have his presence.

6. In the Christian life we have a presence.

Through what Jesus did for us, his death on the cross and his resurrection, he is both the goal of our journey and our companion on the way.

Barclay writes: “The wonder of the Christian life is that we press on surrounded by the saints (not just the ones listed in Hebrews 11 but all those who have gone before us), oblivious to everything but the glory of the goal, and forever in the company of Him who has already made the journey and who reached the goal, and who waits to welcome us when we reach the end.”

It says at the end of our passage this morning that Jesus is both the pioneer, or other versions say the author and the perfecter of our faith. Think about that for a moment. We can’t even take credit for our faith. Not the beginning, not the middle, not the end.

The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-10:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.
For we are God’s handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Even our faith is God’s work!

And in Philippians (1:6), *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*