

Faith and how we see the world

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have a Bible there, if you turn please to page 1007. As I said a moment ago, we are going to be doing a series over this month in this great letter, and this great chapter of that letter, chapter 11 of Hebrews.

And today we are going to be reading verses 1 to 7, kind of introduction to this chapter. So let's read together Hebrews 11, verses 1 to 7.

The author tells us, 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.

[1 : 28] 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. That is the word of God. And may God bless this to our hearts and open our ears as we listen to what he is saying to us.

I'm calling this series Faith in a Faithful God. And both parts of that title are important. It's important, in other words, not just to have faith, but it's important who we have faith in.

And it's in a faithful God. I was reading a story about a Canadian who was a very militant atheist. In other words, he didn't just not believe in God.

[2 : 36] He wanted everyone to know that he didn't believe in God. Indeed, he went on the lecture tour circuit, telling people, rather in the manner of our friend Richard Dawkins, that God was a myth, that God did not exist, and that the stories about him in Scripture were simply false.

One time, however, on one of his journeys, he was involved in a terrible flood, and he escaped only by the skin of his teeth, so to speak.

And that brought him to his senses. Thereafter, he began to preach the gospel with the same enthusiasm as he had proclaimed atheism. But always, as well as preaching the gospel, he gave his testimony, so to speak, about the flood.

As they say, he dined out on this for the rest of his life. And always the conversion became more spectacular, the flood became more horrific, and the escape from it became ever more dramatic. Well, the apocryphal story goes that this man died. And when he reached heaven, the angel who met him said, It's usual on our first night here to give your testimony.

[3 : 50] And his eyes lit up. I'll tell them about the flood, he said. And the angel said, Well, we've heard about that often enough, but do remember that Noah will be in the audience.

Now, you see, the kind of faith which centers around me and my experiences isn't good enough. It's got to be faith in a faithful God, hasn't it?

It's not that I have faith. I often hear people saying, Oh, I place great emphasis on my faith. I rely on my faith. Well, I don't rely on my faith at all.

My faith is very fickle. My faith comes and goes. My faith depends very often on the circumstances. I mean, even on the weather. Believe it or not, it was easier to have faith in Glasgow today than in

Edinburgh.

In Edinburgh, the skies are gray. The wind is chill. But here in Glasgow, where I gather, it never rains. The sun is shining. And in that kind of world, it seems easier to have faith.

[4 : 54] But, says our author, it's not so much that we have faith, it's who we have faith in. Faith in a faithful God. God has spoken.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God. Now, this letter to the Hebrews was written probably to a group of Christians in Rome, scattered around the city in various house churches.

A second and third generation Christians who were, who had rather gone off the boil. Their faith was dwindling. Their enthusiasm was burning low, as often happens to second and third generation Christians.

They are discouraged. There are many problems. There's some persecution. If you read the letter, chapters one to ten, before this, you'll find that they were in times of difficulty and they were becoming discouraged.

And our author writes this great letter to point them to Christ, to point them to the living God. Not to say you ought to have more faith, but saying you've got a faithful God.

[6 : 01] Here is someone who deserves your faith. He said back, if you glance back for a moment, at chapter 10, verse 39, we are not, he says, of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

The author says, look beyond the circumstances. Look beyond either the gray skies or the sunshine. Look beyond your happiness. Look beyond your sadness.

And look to the invisible Lord and the unseen world. Because they are far more real than your circumstances. They are far more real than anything else that's happening.

In these first seven verses, I want to suggest that he does two things. I've called this particular section, faith and how we see the world.

If we look at the world through the spectacles of faith, what kind of a world do we see, in other words? In verses 1 to 3, he says, if we have faith in this unseen, in this invisible God and this unseen world, we look at the universe, at the created order, if you like, in a particular way.

[7 : 18] By faith, verse 3, 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.

Look up at the night sky. Think of the vast expanses of space, some of it far beyond the reach of our most powerful telescopes, those stars that twinkle in the night sky, whose light that we now see left many, many thousands of years ago.

Who made it? Where is it going? How do we fit in? And here, what our author is doing is not so much giving us a definition of faith as a celebration of faith.

He's saying, if we look at the universe through the eyes of faith, we'll see it in a particular way. And he says, he really says two things about how we see the created order.

First of all, he says that we believe that it was created by the word of God. Read back at the beginning of our Bible. God said, God said, God said.

[8 : 25] And when God said, things happen. We often see actions speak louder than words. That's not the case with God. But because with God, words are themselves actions.

Let there be light. And as the words were spoken, light filled the dark and empty universe. And that universe was peopled with life. God creates the universe by his word, and he reveals it by his word. Now, as if we really want to understand the universe, we have to read scripture. Not so much physics, chemistry, and so on. I'm not saying these don't matter. I'm not saying these are irrelevant. But these can only describe to us, if you like, how things work. The pattern of activity, and so on. The Bible tells us that God created the world, and because he created it, he is going to finish the job.

And the Bible tells us in Revelation that he's going to create a new heaven and a new earth. That's the first thing about how we look at the universe. We see something that's brought into being by the word of God.

[9 : 30] And we see something that's explained by the word of God. Now, that doesn't mean we understand every mystery, know the answer to every question. It does mean we know the universe was created for a purpose.

It does mean that you and I are here for a purpose. Our little lives at our specific time and place matter to God. And that's why we've come to listen to his word.

But the other thing he says about how we see the created order is that faith and understanding belong together. By faith. Look at verse 3 again.

Not by faith we take a leap in the dark and forget every sensible idea we have ever had. By faith we understand. In other words, faith and understanding are not enemies.

Faith and understanding belong together according to scripture. The world is not self-explanatory. We need someone to explain it to us.

[10:30] Now, a hundred years ago or so, the fashionable thinking that still dominates many people's mind was established by very clever people like Bertrand Russell, the Huxleys, and so on.

And their view essentially was this. You understand the world by studying the world. There is nothing beyond it. There is nothing outside it. There is nothing greater than it.

Therefore, if you want to understand the world, you study physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology. You study history. Now, of course, it's right to study these things. But the trouble is we are then trapped in this world.

If we get trapped in this world, if there's nothing beyond the world, we end up in what Ecclesiastes calls futility and emptiness. So many mysteries.

Why is it that so many projects come to nothing? Why is it that unscrupulous people prosper and good people seem to fall off the edge, so to speak?

[11:28] And, of course, that's essentially the idea of why in our own day by Richard Dawkins. The world must be understood from the world. You see what that means? It means I can't look back because history is just a meaningless cycle.

And, of course, I can't look forward because there's nothing to look forward to. And I can't look up because there's nothing to look up to. Where can I look then? If I can't look back, I can't look forward, I can't look up, there's only one way I can look inside, isn't it?

And I become the center of the universe. I become what the universe is about. Our author is saying the universe is about God. He made it.

He made you and I. He had a purpose in making it and he's going to bring that purpose to completion. That's the first thing then. If we have faith in this God, the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who created us, the God who rules in history, then we see the universe very differently.

That's why our hymn says, we sang a moment ago, whether our tomorrows are filled with good and ill. Now, if we don't believe in God, if our tomorrows are filled with ill, that will simply destroy us, won't it?

[12:42] But the hymn will triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless you still because we know that God is working out good purposes and that God's kingdom will come.

So how we see the creation. Secondly, the rest of the section, verses 4 to 7, how we live our lives. Not just how we think of the world, but how we live our lives.

And having lingered, if you like, in Genesis 1 and 2, the story of creation, now our author goes on to the world of Genesis 4 to 11 and takes three figures from the dawn of history.

What our author is saying, right from the beginning of history, people who believed in God lived in this particular way. And because of this, they are people that we can look to as examples.

Later on, at the beginning of chapter 12, he's going to say, we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. And here are three of them. A pattern is established here.

[13:44] And first of all, the story of Abel back in Genesis 4. Not a pleasant story because it tells us that the first baby to be born into the world was a murderer and the second baby to be born was his victim.

In other words, it wasn't easy for these guys to live by faith. They lived in a dangerous, uncertain world, the same as we do. And in other words, if we are going to worship God, we need faith.

That's what Abel tells us. By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. Now the great theme of Hebrews is there is only one acceptable sacrifice.

That's the sacrifice that Christ himself made when he dies for our sins took our guilt, stood in our place and offered us forgiveness. Abel recognized that, however dimly, the very beginning of history.

Abel recognized we're not saved by religion. We're not saved by rituals. We are saved by faith. And, of course, Abel didn't know, didn't know who Jesus was, but he saw him, as we'll see next week. [14:49] He saw him, as it were, in the distance. If we are going to worship God truly, if we're going to have faith, then that's what it means. He says, don't follow Cain, because Cain thought his own good deeds were good enough.

Who is it who has the lasting message for us? It's Abel, isn't it? Through his faith, verse 4, though he died, he still speaks. How does Abel speak to us?

Abel speaks to us, surely, through his story in Genesis 4, and through this commentary on it here. If we are going to truly worship God, we worship him in faith.

We realize that he has given us the sacrifice to forgive our sins, and to make us acceptable for him. How do we please God, secondly?

By, and this is the next character, Enoch. By faith, Enoch was taken up, so it should not see death. You can read Enoch's story, or a little bit about it, in Genesis 5.

[15:51] He has not so much a walk-on part as a walk-off birth, but because he, Enoch, walked with God, and God took him. Read that chapter, Genesis 5.

I'm told there are 75 names in it. I don't know, I haven't counted them. Not the chapter to volunteer to read aloud, if you don't like reading Old Testament names.

In that chapter, the bell tolls over and over and over again. All the people in that chapter appear to do were to be born and then to die. But one time, the bell did not toll.

It was for Enoch because Enoch was taken straight to heaven. Now, we must suppose all these other 75 people and others alive at the time were concerned only with this world.

They explored this world, they enjoyed this world, their horizons were limited to this world. Enoch, on the other hand, his horizons went far beyond this world, to the invisible world and to the living Lord.

[16:50] And Enoch in the New Testament is seen as not, no longer a lone figure, but part of the whole great multitude of God's people who honour and love him and one day will be taken to join him in heaven.

So, Abel shows us how to worship God. Enoch shows us how to please God. And Noah, and you can read the story of Noah in Genesis 6 and following, Noah tells us about faith and the future.

By faith, verse 7, Noah being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, that's the flood of course, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

Noah prepared for judgment. In other words, he believed God when God said he was going to judge the world. Many people don't believe that today. Many people believe that God is not going to judge the world.

Now, think about it for a minute. If God does not judge the world, what's the alternative? The world continues in the mess it's in, the mixture of good and evil, the terrible disasters that happen, both on a national and international scale and in our personal lives.

[18:07] If God doesn't judge the world, then we really have to doubt God's love. How can a loving God look down on the evil and the suffering and do nothing about it?

That's why he is going to judge the world. Noah prepared for this and Noah tried to prepare others for this. You read about him in Peter's second letter and Peter said, Noah was a preacher of righteousness.

As Noah built that ark and as people no doubt mocked him and questioned him, Noah explained to them, I'm building this ark because God is going to judge the world and his faith.

In other words, Noah wasn't living in cloud cuckoo land. Noah wasn't one of those who said, oh, I'm only interested in the future. Noah says the only way to live in the present is to realize that one day this present world is going to come to an end and God is going to judge the world.

And that's why in verse 7, the author says, he became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. If you're an heir, you haven't yet inherited but you are promised it, haven't you?

[19:13] And that's really what Christians are in this world. We are heirs of righteousness. We haven't yet received the inheritance. We've been promised it. And Noah, way back in the great on of human history, is a preacher of righteousness.

So faith and how we view the world, faith and how we view the created order, faith and how we live. And that is, speaks right into our 21st century world.

We live in a mysterious universe as they did. We maybe know a lot more about how the universe works. We are still, we still live in a vulnerable and uncertain world.

We don't know the future and all our plans can be tossed aside because of unexpected circumstances. Faith calls us not to a blind leap into the dark.

Faith calls us into the family of the living God, joins us with people like Abel, Enoch and Noah who at the very beginning of human history testified to their belief in a faithful God.

[20 : 18] My prayer for each one of us here is that that is the kind of life we will live. Lives of faith, not because we depend on our faith, but because God is faithful.

Let's pray. God our Father, how we thank you that our salvation does not depend on our faith, does not depend on our efforts, but on your unchanging faithfulness.

So open our eyes to the reality of the world, open our eyes to the reality of who you are, and help us as we leave here and go about our business to be people of faith looking for the city whose builder and architect is God.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.