

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part forty-four

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FAITH IN INVISIBLE THINGS - HOW SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING IS FORMED

Hebrews 11:1-7 - "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."

The phrase I want to launch this study with is found at the beginning of **verse 3** - "By faith we understand..." Just pause before moving on to the rest of the sentence. We'll come back to that. The reason I want to start with that phrase is it seems so counter-intuitive to today's world-view. **Science** and **education** are the things that bring understanding. **Faith** is reserved for things no one can be dogmatic about. Faith is for things we **don't** or **can't** understand.

Or maybe we should say it differently. Faith is for **privately held opinions that are religious in nature**. That's why numerous "**people of faith**"

can all hold to vastly different ideas about God and religion. And we're fine with that because, after all, these varying views are all just **matters of faith**.

Facts, on the other hand, like mathematics or driving on the correct side of the road, must be universally acknowledged and those holding different ideas are simply **wrong**. So the opposite of **fact** is **error**, whereas, unless a culture has become totally intolerant, the opposite of **faith** is simply **another faith** or **ignoring faith**. No real harm done.

Then we start unpacking this shocking text. And the writer has the audacity to say that it is actually **faith** - and **one particular faith to boot** - that brings soundness of understanding. And the kind of mental soundness he's talking about will include things like the beginning of time, the creation of the world, the seriousness of sin, the judgment of God, and the absolute essentiality of knowing God and the only way of properly coming to God.

And the implication of this text is there is no proper understanding of **anything** important apart from **this specific faith**. That's a culturally stunning statement. The Bible - this wildly outrageous revelation from God - is constantly doing that. It simply **ignores** our tastes and **dares** us to believe it.

The more I studied this chapter the more I came to believe it isn't just a randomly assembled collection of faith heroes. There's a rough **chronological order** flowing through it. It begins with a definition of faith in general terms and then quickly divides into four blocks of revealed history. **First**, it traces this world from creation up to Noah and the flood. **Second**, it zeros in on the calling and offspring of Abraham. **Third**, with a few exceptions, it seems to give more detail to Moses and those who followed. And **finally** it deals more anonymously with a group who persisted in faith even when all it brought them was persecution and certain death.

Today we'll work our way through the first section in **verses 1-7**

1) **FAITH DEALS WITH THINGS UNSEEN - NOT THINGS UNREAL**

Hebrews 11:1-2 - "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."

While faith itself is invisible - and by that I mean faith in God or faith in absolutely anything else - while that faith is invisible, you can see the **effects** of faith in those who exercise it. That's the meaning of that last sentence - "**For by it the people of old received their commendation**." We will see the fruit of faith in all of those listed in the following examples in this chapter. The writer is setting us up to notice this.

Faith deals with *unseen* things, not *unreal* things. This is true for Christians and for everybody else. What color is *fear*? Who has ever seen *love* or *joy*? We've all seen people doing *loving things*. But those are the *outward effects* of love. Love itself can't be seen by anyone. We've seen people do *joyful things*. We've seen smiles and laughter and songs and whistled tunes. But those are the *outward effects* of joy. Not joy itself. We *feel* fear and love and joy *first*. Then we *express* them. And it's that expressing of these things that's visible.

So, truth be told, this *unseen realm* is not exclusively a *religious* phenomena. Everyone on earth knows what it is to give *evidence* or *substance* to unseen realities. This process is absolutely unavoidable.

Our writer's point in verse one is that *since the fall into sin* what happens *automatically* with the invisible emotions like fear and love and joy must be made to happen *consciously* with invisible spiritual realities. Our fallen reflex response to the things of God is *repressive*. It's not that these invisible spiritual realities aren't there or can't be sensed. Our problem is we are naturally *disinclined* to acknowledging them.

We who place trust in and express involvement in the existence of a thousand invisible things reject a selected *few* invisible things.

This is the darkness from which our minds need redeeming. This is the great untangling of our inner understanding that is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the situation *faith* must confront. This is the situation *faith* must change.

Hebrews 11:1 describes the finished product of faith. It tells of the *"assurance"* and *"conviction"* of living faith. It shows us the *product* of faith. But there are other verses in the New Testament that describe the *process* of this faith - the process of this *renewed understanding*:

Romans 8:22-25 - "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. [23] And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. [24] For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? [25] But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

One of the things the Holy Spirit does with the things *"...we do not see"* (25) is the implanting of the *"first-fruits"* of them right now into our hearts (23). This is not the *entire substance* of them, but it is a *real taste*. In just the same way that the *first-fruits* of the harvest aren't the whole crop, but are none the less a real portion of what is to come, so the Holy Spirit quickens *hope* around the prospect of the fulfillment of all that is still future in God's promise.

Here's another description of the same process - **2 Corinthians 4:16-18** - "So we do not lose heart. Though our *outer self* is wasting away, our *inner self is being renewed day by day*. [17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

This is an amazing text. Paul actually describes Christian people *looking* at things invisible. They're *gazing* directly at things no one can *see*. This is another way of saying what Paul said in **Romans 8** about the Holy Spirit implanting the *first-fruits* of these things in our hearts. We are already *tasting* the fruit and we are already *seeing* what is yet invisible.

Now look again at our Hebrews text to see the net result of the perspective of genuine Christian faith - **Hebrews 11:1** - "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

And in words very much like the Apostle Paul's we just read, this is our writer's way of picking up the thread of logic from **Hebrews 10:35-39** - "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."

That last sentence is the important one - "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." And how faith does this is the theme of **Hebrews 11:1**. Faith gives *present substance*

to *still unseen* future rewards. Faith pulls still invisible realities into the present and gives them *weight* and *influence*. In the words of Paul, the Holy Spirit brings the *first-fruits* of the future harvest. And our writer will spend the whole chapter telling us - *showing* us - what the effects of that faith are.

2) **THE FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH IS THE CREATION AND ESTABLISHING OF THIS VISIBLE WORLD OUT OF NOTHING BY THE DIVINE WORD OF GOD**

Hebrews 11:3 - "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."

The created world we all *see* right now certainly *is* visible. But, says our text, it was not *created* out of visible things. It came from nothing but the creating power of God's word. Something visible from nothing at all.

We need to see the logic of this chapter. There's reason our writer *begins* with faith's understanding of *creation*. What this truth does is set in motion a path for *understanding other* important truths - "*By faith we understand...*" (3).

Faith in creation as the *cause* of all that is gives *understanding* - gives a *proper foundation* - for all the other purposes and plans of God still in the future that seem equally as impossible to our senses as the creation of the world out of nothing at all.

Considering the beginning of creation gives a logical framework to the finish - the *conclusion* of this created order - and the establishment of God's promised *new creation* when Christ Jesus returns. God will one day *raise up mankind* from the dust of the earth because initially God *created* man from the dust of the earth. This is how faith thinks. God *finishes* because God *began*. This is the "*understanding*" of faith (11:3). Faith must begin where God begins.

3) **BECAUSE GOD IS CREATOR OF ALL HE ALONE DECIDES HOW HE WILL BE APPROACHED AND WORSHIPED**

Hebrews 11:4 - "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."

This challenging text assumes some kind of instruction of which we have no record. I start challenging texts by asking them questions. Where did Cain and Abel ever get the idea to bring offerings to God? There are no *surrounding nations* from which to borrow the concept for this practice. So the arguments of *Brian Zahnd* and *Greg Boyd* don't apply well here.

We have no record of Adam or Eve bringing offerings to God. So my assumption is somewhere along the way God gave instruction about offerings and sacrifices to Cain and Abel. And we also know God *preferred* Abel's offering to Cain's because the text *tells* us so.

But there's more. We also know Cain *knew* God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not his own. We know that because that's the *reason* Cain *killed* Abel. So somewhere along the line, in details not recorded, this was all *known* truth in the parties involved.

So our writer of Hebrews crafts this eleventh chapter carefully. Faith begins with the establishing of the rightful rule of the One who created all things. Truthfully, God alone has divine rights to rule His creation.

Our writer moves immediately from creation to the first revelation of acceptance and rejection of the Creator God's pattern for worship and redemption. Faith, if it is to be sound in *understanding*, rests fully on God's right to prescribe how He will be approached.

Make no mistake. From the text it certainly seems that Cain was as *sincere* in his offering as Abel was with his. But this is not where faith places emphasis. The issue isn't *sincerity* but *obedience*. Cain's offering could, at best, celebrate God as provider and preserver. Abel's centered on God as Redeemer. Abel's sacrifice pointed to what would become the pattern of the entire Old Covenant for acceptance of sinful people with a holy Creator. This would always demand the shedding of blood. The world would be, for generations, preparing for the coming of the Lamb of God.

One more important thing. Our cultural mind-set world hates this narrow approach. It constantly usurps God's revelation as

it creates its own criteria for religious devotion. And the hatred for God's demand of approaching Him through Christ alone is as strong today as when Cain slaughtered Abel out of the very same resentment. Where sacrifice for sin is rejected, as with Brian Zandh and Greg Boyd, Cain lives in the professing church.

4) **WHY THE FAITH OF ENOCH MATTERS AND WHAT HIS FAITH PREDICTED**

Hebrews 11:5-6 - "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."

I believe it's necessary to hold these two verses together because it's hard for us to see what being "**taken up**" has to do with Enoch's faith. Then we read that he "**pleased God**" (5). And to make his point clearer our writer then goes on to say it's impossible to "**please God**" apart from faith (6).

But why Enoch? Why is he included in this exposition of the **understanding and exposition of faith**? **Jude** tells us Enoch was prophet (**Jude 14-15**). But the way he left this world points to more than even Enoch might have imagined. I think there are two important things to remember:

- a) **The same quality of faith can bring very different results.** Is it an accident this testimony of **Enoch** follows directly on the heels of the testimony of **Abel**? I don't think so. Enoch's faith takes Him directly to glory without seeing death. Abel's faith leads to his murder. It's always a dangerous game to measure faith by earthly ease and prosperity.
- b) **Enoch provides a powerful testimony of the physicality of existence in God's eternal presence.** This is the value of the two accounts of **Enoch** and **Elijah**. They are different from the many **resurrection** accounts in the Old and New Testaments. Apart from our Lord all those raised died again.

The resurrections recorded in various Biblical accounts tell us nothing about the **permanent condition** of temporarily resurrected bodies. But Enoch reveals the nature of the **life after the life after death**. We get a picture of what will happen one day to all who are still alive when Jesus comes again. There will come a transformation of actual **physical existence**. There will be **solid life eternal** in God's kingdom. Christ's physical resurrection guarantees it. And through the faith of Enoch we have a brief picture of it.

5) **THE UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH PERCEIVES A WARNING TO PROCLAIM AND A JUDGMENT TO FEAR**

Hebrews 11:7 - "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."

Have you seriously considered the extended significance of Noah's faith? There was a lot riding on his obedience. Everyone but Noah's family would be destroyed in the flood. The rest of humanity would become extinct. And, but for Noah's faith, the **seed for the promised Messiah** would have vanished too. You have a Redeemer because Noah didn't quit when his friends laughed at him.

Noah embraced the revelation of a coming judgment that looked **irrational** and **impossible**. No one else respected the judgment theology of Noah. He held to this very unpopular conviction. To this day the Biblical revelation of divine judgment has always found limited mass cultural reception.

Noah stayed with the same assigned obedience for scores and scores of years. Some scholars believe 120 years. That kind of faith commitment can't be sustained by emotional energy. Remember, no one had ever built an ark before Noah. Apart from the instruction from God this was a totally unseen and unimagined task. On top of this there was no rain falling and no water in sight. And Moses built what no one had ever heard of before for 120 years.

It all played out exactly as God had warned. The cultural unacceptance of divine judgment didn't keep it from happening. And the Apostle Peter felt compelled to remind the New Testament church of the same truth:

2 Peter 2:1-5 - “But *false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you*, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. [2] And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. [3] And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. [4] For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; [5] if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly....”

There will always be false teachers who soften those words. Peter reminds the church the scoffers in Noah's day did the same thing. Until it was too late.

I have one closing thought. Consider for a moment the way the *New King James Version* words this same verse - **Hebrews 11:7** - “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, *moved with godly fear*, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.” The old *KJV* just says Noah, “*moved with fear, built an ark....*”

This is the last thing I have time to advocate - especially to those in an environment hostile to your allegiance to Christ. Your faith will never stand if it remains in your head as doctrine. You will never stand long on that passive foundation. That's because your faith only works when it *moves* you. That's the test. It won't let you stand still or silent. Trying to hold your faith silently and passively is like trying to stand still on a bicycle.

Faith - *Noah-like faith* - always *moves* the one possessing it. It drives you in life. There is always something divinely *compelling* in it. It isn't something you have in church or something you download from your parents. You are *personally moved* by it. Your faith *involves* you in Christ as Lord. It is an active force - driven by the Spirit of God Himself - that won't leave you on the sidelines. It always takes God dreadfully seriously. Like Noah, it constructs whatever life of obedience God requires - and never quits.

No wonder Jesus said this was the victory that *overcomes* the world. No wonder Paul said faith would “*quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.*”