

## THE DIFFERENCE JESUS MAKES

### Studies in the book of Hebrews

#### 4. The life of faith (Hebrews 11)

This morning, our series in the book of Hebrews has reached chapter 11 –

Perhaps the most famous chapter in the book – a great meditation and celebration of *the life of faith*.

But as we turn to this chapter together now, we need to acknowledge something –

*There are few words in the Bible more misunderstood in our world today – than the word ‘faith’.*

Just one recent example of that...

When Nick Clegg was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats in 2007, he became the first leader of a British political party who declared himself openly to be an atheist.

At first, that label wasn't expected to cause him any problems...

British politics tries to keep itself as free as possible from any interactions with religion –

As the spin doctor Alistair Campbell famously said of Tony Blair's government in its early years – “*We don't do God...!*”

BUT –

As the recent general election wore on – and as the Liberal Democrats looked more and more likely to do well in it –

Nick Clegg began to distance himself from the label of ‘atheist’.

He knew that he needed every vote he could get – including the votes of religious believers –

And the term ‘atheist’ does place you in rather aggressive company these days (just think of the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens...)

In one interview I heard him give on the radio just before the election, Mr Clegg was asked outright by an interviewer:

*“Why don't you believe?”*

In a rather faltering way, he said the following

*“Because I quite simply don't know whether [...] God exists... [...] I'm not a man [...] of faith ... sometimes I very much wish I was, because I think having faith must be a great thing. You know, members of my family do, my wife does, my children are being brought up in her church, and I think it can be a wonderful, unifying thing ... but I, I myself [...] have not [...] experienced [...] what other people of faith have. Maybe it'll happen one day.”*

**Faith –**

You either have it – or you *don't*.

It's something you catch – like chicken pox.

Like chicken pox, it's probably better to catch it when you're young...

It's a bit more inconvenient if you 'get it' when you're older...

According to a lot of people today, 'faith' is something that just floats around –  
And either you have it – or you don't.

Alongside this widely-held view of faith today, there is also the sense a lot of people have that 'faith' is something vaguely positive –  
You certainly get that from Nick Clegg's interview...

It's a nice thing to have if you have it –  
But – ultimately – *it's not that important.*

The great adage concerning faith in our time is:  
*"It doesn't matter what you believe – as long as you believe it doesn't matter."*

The writer of the book of Hebrews would tear his hair out at such a view of faith –  
As something *inexplicable* – nice – but ultimately, *unimportant* in the real world.

According to this letter we've been exploring over the past few weeks –  
***Faith is hugely important.***

In fact,  
***The only way to avoid the wrath and judgement of God – according to Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament –  
Is through faith.***

The writer of Hebrews urges his readers to put their faith in the crucified and risen Jesus –  
their great 'high priest' –  
Because if they *don't*, they will be *judged by God!*

Look at Hebrews 10:26-31.

The writer has written this letter to urge his readers to *trust in Jesus Christ* –  
And to *persevere in their faith in him!*

If you've been here over the past few weeks, you'll have seen that he is at great pains to open his readers' eyes to *who Jesus is* –  
*What he has done for his people* –  
*And what he will do for his people.*

*And who are his people?*

Crucially, we need to see that the people of God – are ***those who place their faith in Jesus – and who go on having faith in him!***

All the benefits won by Jesus that we've explored in this series –

- Forgiveness from sin by his blood
- His bringing to bear all his strength to sustain us in our weakness
- A glorious new creation that now awaits his people

All of those benefits are reserved for those who have faith in him!

If we don't have faith in Jesus, then we will not benefit from what he has achieved for his people –

Instead, we will face the judgement of God!

According to the book of Hebrews –

***Faith matters!***

***Faith – and whether or not we have it –***

***Is hugely important!***

And Hebrews chapter 11 is written for us, so that we can have a truer understanding of:

- ***What faith is all about –***
- ***And what our lives will look like, if we place our faith in Jesus Christ.***

This is a really important chapter for us to hear this morning –

Particularly in the culture we live in today, where faith is so *misunderstood*.

If you're a Christian here this morning –

Then you need to understand the true character of faith in Jesus, so you will be encouraged to persevere in it!

And if you're not a Christian here this morning –

Then, please listen to how the writer of Hebrews describes the life of faith here – and ask yourself if it sounds any more real or attractive than our world's often anaemic view of it.

So – turning to Hebrews 11...

The writer begins with a definition of faith in v.1 –

And he follows this definition with some *tangible examples of faith* – found throughout the Old Testament.

He is not interested in giving his readers a theoretical or philosophical understanding of faith –

Instead, he wants his readers to witness ***faith in action***.

Throughout this letter, he has urged the discouraged Christians he is writing to, to put their faith in Jesus –

And in all that he has won for them –

And now, in chapter 11, he presents them with a gallery of men and women who *did just that!*

*Who placed their trust in the living God – and lived their lives trusting in him and in the promises he had made to them!*

With even the most casual knowledge of the Old Testament, we would see –

The men and women celebrated in this chapter were ordinary, fallible, flesh-and-blood people.

They often stumbled along the way – and they constantly had to depend on God’s grace towards them in their lives...

*But – here they are!*

*Vivid examples of the life of faith the writer is urging his readers to live out!*

Men and women who placed their trust in God –  
And whose lives were transformed as a result!

Before he turns to those Old Testament examples of faith, the writer seeks to give his readers – including us – a helpful definition of faith.

### **A definition of faith (vv.1-2)**

*What are we to make of this definition?*

At first, it doesn’t sound that different to the understanding of faith we began with –  
The one so common in our secular modern world.

*Faith – is sort of believing something without any evidence for it...  
‘What we hope for... what we do not see...’*

It sounds at first like –  
‘Just wish hard enough – and you can believe in *anything*...!’

BUT –  
We need to remember something that sounds obvious, but is in fact vitally important...

*Hebrews chapter 11 – comes after Hebrews chapter 1!*

And Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1 tells us:  
We live in a world ***where God has spoken!***

Read Hebrews 1:1-2.

God has spoken through the Old Testament prophets –  
And God has spoken through his Son, Jesus!

And turn with me to Hebrews chapter 2 –  
***We have the eye-witness accounts – and the evidence of God at work in our world!***

Read Hebrews 2:3-4.

These verses are a great summary of the powerful evidence there is for the truth of the Christian gospel –

- The reliability of the eye-witness accounts in the New Testament – written ‘*by those who heard [Jesus]*’ –
- And the transformed lives of Jesus’ followers – transformed by the Holy Spirit!

So –

*our ‘hope’ is based on what Jesus has done for us and what he has promised us.*

*Our knowledge of things unseen is based on Jesus’ revelation of them to us.*

Faith, in the Bible, is:

- **Trusting God’s word to us**

And specifically, according to Hebrews 11:1 – God’s word to us:

- **About the world to come**
- **About the world unseen**

If you’ve been here over the past few weeks, you’ll have seen that the writer of this letter keeps on lifting our eyes to *the future* –

*To the glorious new creation that Jesus has prepared for all those who trust in him.*

And he returns to that future – ‘the world to come’ – again and again in this chapter.

But v.1 reminds us of *the challenge of the life of faith* –

Namely – *we don’t live by sight!*

In his word, God asks us to trust him when he speaks of things that we cannot see –

Things that are impossible for us to investigate or prove.

Now – let me say again this morning –

Christian faith is not blind faith! It isn’t merely a leap into the dark!

Witness the historical records we have of Jesus’ life we’ve already referred to this morning...!

BUT –

Neither is it simply a matter of weighing up all the evidence and opting for Christianity as the world-view that makes most sense.

There *is* a place for that sort of ‘weighing up’ –

But if our faith *remains at that level* –

At simply being convinced by what we can see of the evidence –

***Then it isn’t a living faith in Jesus Christ –***

***According to Hebrews 11 and the rest of Scripture!***

Christian faith isn’t simply about believing the right doctrines –

It’s about believing in *a person* – the living God –

And it’s about believing that ***what that person says to you can be trusted!***

So –

God calls us to trust him when he tells us that there is an unseen world –

That there are spiritual realities and forces at work all around us, every bit as real as the world we can see and touch.

God calls us to trust him when he tells us there is a devil –

God's great enemy who, according to Hebrews 2:14-15, has enslaved sinful humanity, using their fear of death –

And only Jesus can set us free!

God calls us to trust him that – in the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6 – in the Christian life,

*'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'* (Ephesians 6:12)

God calls us to trust him that prayer really makes a difference –

And that the only way we can live for him is in dependence on *his* strength, not our own.

God calls us to trust him that the gospel really is 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16) –

And that it is worth sharing it with people, even when that is hard –

Even when we face ridicule or hostility as a result!

To truly live our lives for Jesus Christ, we need to acknowledge that there is an unseen, spiritual world of which we are all a part –

That there is a war going on between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness –

And that the only way we can be sure we fighting that war on the right side – on *God's side* –

Is if we place our trust in Jesus –

and rely on his strength made available to us.

With that in mind, we can actually read Hebrews 11:1 as not simply a definition of biblical faith –

But as **a question** the writer is posing his readers –

Including *us*.

*Is this the faith that you possess?*

*Is this the faith that marks our life together as a church – and our lives as individuals?*

Are you sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see?

Do you believe God when he promises you a glorious future?

Do you believe God's word when it describes an unseen world every bit as real as the world we see all around us?

Ultimately, that question is:

**Are you living by faith – or are you living by sight?**

***Do you live your life as if this world was all there is –***

*As if the only reality that matters is what you see around you in the present?*

*Or are you trusting in God's word to us and allowing it to shape the way you see the world*

–

*And what you value in your life today?*

v.2 tells us -

*'This is what the ancients were commended for'*

And in the rest of this chapter, the writer turns our attention to a great roll-call of men and women of faith in the Old Testament –

*To **living examples of saving faith!***

You could preach a dozen sermons on this chapter and what it tells us about the life of faith –  
And I want to encourage you to go away and read it for yourselves later.

All I'm going to do this morning is focus our attention on the lives of the two most prominent figures from the Old Testament who appear here –

***Abraham – and Moses.***

The writer to the Hebrews is convinced that his readers can learn great things about the life of faith Jesus calls us to live,

From looking at the lives of these two men.

How did Abraham and Moses' faith in the living God transform their lives –

And how can our faith in the same living God transform our lives today?

Basically –

What does saving faith look like?

I believe the writer of Hebrews gives so much space in this chapter over to Abraham and Moses,

Because they give us such a powerful portrait of what the life of faith *looks like in practice.*

First of all, Abraham demonstrates that saving faith is faith that:

- **Trusts God's purposes in the face of uncertainty, weakness and mystery (Abraham: vv.8-19)**

Hebrews 11 focuses on *three key moments* in Abraham's life.

Look at vv.8-10.

Abraham responded to God's call to trust in him by obeying him –  
leaving his old life behind –  
and going to the land God had promised to give to him –

*'even though' – v.8 – 'he did not know where he was going.'*

Abraham trusted God in the midst of *uncertainty.*

Look at vv.11-12.

Abraham's wife Sarah couldn't have children –  
And when God promised them a son, Abraham himself was 'past age' – '*as good as dead*', as v.12 so delicately puts it...!

But they trusted in God's purposes for them –

And God was able to overcome their weakness and '*enable*' them to become parents to a son, Isaac.

Their faith in God was not without its stumbling points along the way, Genesis is determined to tell us –

But the overall direction of their lives was one of faith in God's purposes.

In the midst of very real *weakness*, Abraham and Sarah trusted God.

And then, in vv.17-19, Abraham is tested by God –

And told to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

Abraham didn't know why God was telling him to sacrifice '*his one and only son*' –

But after a lifetime of witnessing God's goodness and faithfulness to him, he chose to trust God's purposes – both for Isaac and for himself.

Read v.19.

In the face of terrible *mystery* –

At a moment when Abraham just could not understand what God was doing –

He chose to *trust in God's purposes for him* – and God blessed him and his family richly for that...!

I hope we can see the parallels between Abraham's life – and the experiences the Hebrew Christians were going through in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

Those Christians were facing hostility, both from their Jewish culture –

And from their Roman rulers.

- *They felt **uncertain** about the future*

Could they stay the course as Christians?

Were God's purposes for them really worth the sacrifices they had to make?

- *They felt **weak** in and of themselves*

They were coming to realise that, left to their own devices, they were about as likely to persevere for Jesus

as Abraham and Sarah were likely to have a child in their old age.

- *And they did not always understand what God was doing in their lives*

God's ways were sometimes a mystery to them...

Why does Hebrews 11 point them to Abraham?

Because Abraham had experienced everything they were experiencing –  
And he had discovered God to be *faithful* –  
*To be good* –  
*To be worth trusting!*

Through Abraham's faithfulness, God was setting in motion his plan to bring about the salvation of the world.

In calling Abraham, God was beginning to reverse the curse of the Fall –  
A process that will finally end in the new creation –  
What v.10 describes as '*the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*'

BUT –  
Abraham didn't get to see that new creation –  
v.13 tells us that he was '*still living by faith when he died.*'

He only '*saw it and welcomed it from a distance.*'

*And that is the life of faith!*

*Will we trust God that he is working out his good purposes –  
Even when we do not get to see the end from the beginning?*

It seems that all a sizable proportion of the Hebrew Christians could see when they received this letter – was the reality of their current struggles –  
And so often, that is our experience, too, isn't it?

We feel uncertain –  
We feel weak –  
We do not always understand what God is doing in our lives.

Like Abraham, we discover that the life God calls us to is *not easy!*

God calls us to live as 'aliens and strangers on earth' (v.13) –  
And in the short term, that can be an uncomfortable existence!

A Christian's experience of life in this fallen world is similar to the life of a recent immigrant –  
Or that of a refugee.

And because of that, we will often provoke *suspicion* –  
*Unease* –  
Sometimes, *outright hostility!*

That is because we don't belong to this world –  
We belong to *Christ* – and to the *new creation* he is preparing for us!

Turn the page for a moment and look at 11:35b-38

Read aloud.

If we were in any doubt, these descriptions of the fate of many of God's people makes it clear

–

*The Christian life is not a life of comfort and ease – of triumph and joy, all the way to heaven!*

As the apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:19 –

*'If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.'*

No –

Abraham sustained his faith in God by looking forward to the future God had prepared for him –

*'to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God'* (v.10) –

to *'a better country'* – v.16 – *'a heavenly one'* –

***The new creation!***

So –

The writer to the Hebrews counsels us:

***Don't expect to be welcomed in this world!***

You won't be...!

***And don't expect to feel at home here!***

You won't always!

One day, you will feel completely at home in this world – when Jesus returns!

Like Abraham, we are living in the land God has promised to give us one day –

But it is not our's yet!

This is not the new creation yet!

And so until then,

We will face times of *uncertainty – of weakness – of mystery*, when we just will not understand what God is doing in our lives...

The question Abraham asks us is:

***Will you trust God's purposes for you as you wait for Jesus to return?***

***And will you take heart from God's word and his promises that he will one day bring you home –***

***To a place of joy and rest, won for you by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?***

And in the meantime –

***Will you choose to fear God more than you fear this world?***

That is the great lesson we get from the life of Moses here...!

- **Chooses to fear God more than this world (Moses: vv.23-29)**

According to the writer of Hebrews, the key moments in Moses' life centred round a choice that faces God's people, every single day of our lives –

**Who will we fear more?**

*The world we live in?*

*Or the living God?*

Look at v.23

Moses' parents *did not fear* the king of Egypt!

They recognised that their son was special –

That he was important to God's purposes in salvation –

So they kept him safe for three months!

Look at vv.24-26

As a child, Moses was found and raised by Pharaoh's daughter – and he could have remained in Egypt as a prince –

But he '*chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God*' –

*'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.'* (v.26)

v.27 –

he did not '*fear the king's anger*' – instead, he chose to fear the invisible but living God!

The choice that stood before Moses is the same choice that stands before all of us today:

***Who will you fear? Who will you live for?***

***Will we live for the treasures of Egypt?***

For what this world can offer us?

***Or will we live our lives for the living God –***

***And look ahead to our reward from him – eternal life in the new creation?***

Moses reminds us here –

Either we will live for the world – or we will live for God –

*We cannot live for both!*

Saving faith is like a marriage.

Once you get married, you have made the decision to close off all other romantic relationships!

That doesn't mean you cut yourself off from everyone who isn't your husband or your wife –  
And similarly, Christians are to remain in this world – to relate to people in this world.

BUT –

We need to watch our hearts closely...

*Don't flirt with the world and tell yourself that it's harmless!  
Because it isn't!*

Flirting with the world can lead to out-and-out faithlessness to Jesus –  
It can lead to spiritual adultery –

And left unchecked, that leads only to death!

***Saving faith chooses to fear God more than this world.***

That is a *daily* choice –  
A daily decision to remain faithful to Jesus.

That is why the whole Christian life is a life of *repentance and faith* –

- Repenting of our fear or love of the world
- And putting our faith afresh in Jesus Christ and the life he has called us to!

Moses urges us to fear God more than the opinion of this world!

By presenting us with Abraham, Moses and many other great figures of faith from the Old Testament,

The writer of Hebrews wants us to see what faith looks like in practice.

He wants us to see that throughout Scripture, saving faith is far more than simply believing the right doctrines –

No – saving faith *transforms us into the people of God* –  
*And it expresses itself in the character of our lives* –

*In our obedience and worship of our God!*

By pointing us to Abraham, Moses and the others in Hebrews 11, the writer is calling his readers – including every Christian here this morning –

To lives of *radical obedience to Jesus Christ!*

He is calling us to live as aliens and strangers in this world –

To choose disgrace for the sake of Christ, rather than comfort here and now.

But –

As we finish, we need to recognise a vital truth that stands behind all the descriptions of saving faith in this chapter.

The life of faith –

The life of radical obedience to Jesus that we are called to here, *cannot be lived simply by us trying harder –  
Or disciplining ourselves more.*

*It cannot be lived in our own strength!*

Right the way through this chapter, the writer wants us to see that saving faith:

- **Rests on God's faithfulness, not our own (e.g. vv.11, 19, 27)**

Look at v.11 –

Abraham believed he would be a father because '*he considered him faithful who had made the promise.*'

Or v.19 –

Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, because he '*reasoned that God could raise the dead.*'

Or v.27 –

Moses persevered '*because he saw him who is invisible.*'

It is not ultimately the quality or strength of Abraham or Moses' faith the writer wants us to remember here –

It is *the object* of their faith – the God of complete faithfulness – that he calls us to worship and trust in for ourselves!

At times, the faith of God's people in the Old Testament was extremely weak and faltering.

Look at v.29's description of the people of Israel.

When you actually read over the account of them crossing the Red Sea in Exodus 14, the Israelites look like anything but a strong example of faith –

They are almost paralysed by fear as the Egyptians advanced on them.

BUT –

In spite of that fear, the people of Israel ultimately *did* respond in faith, by going forward into the path through the Red Sea –

And they were saved!

There is great comfort here for the Hebrew Christians –

And for any believer aware of their own weakness here today...!

*A faltering faith can still go forward, as long as the object of your faith is sound!*

Picture a lake for a moment – frozen over in the winter.

One person could decide with great assurance that the ice can hold his weight –

And he might begin to stride across it...

But if the ice is too thin, it will crack – and he will drown.

Another person might nervously and tentatively inch their way across the frozen lake on another day, never feeling completely safe until they reach the other side –

But if the ice is strong enough to hold them – they *will* make it across!

When it comes to the life of faith, the question we need to ask ourselves is not:

‘Do I have enough faith? How much faith do I have right now?’

The crucial question – for us, as it was for people in the Old Testament, is:

***Will God hold my weight?***

***Is God faithful to his promises?***

***Is he able to keep every one of the promises he had made to us in Christ Jesus?***

The writer of Hebrews is convinced:

***God is faithful – and his faithfulness is able to overcome our wavering faith!***

All he calls us to do is –

***Keep going back to him and depending on him!***

Step-by-step –

Into the future he had prepared for us –

Into the future won for us by his Son, Jesus, at the cross.