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What Is Faith?
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the **assurance**^[a] of things hoped for, the **conviction**^[b] of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith^[c] our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

...⁸ By faith Abraham **obeyed** when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered^[d] him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance **they saw and greeted them**. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a **better homeland, that is, a heavenly one**. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Life is a **mess**, isn't it?

It seems like every day we wake up to new horrible headlines.

It's enough to make you want to pull the covers up over your head and stay in bed, right? And that's not even all we have to deal with.

That's the **extra stress** on top of what we are facing in our personal lives!

Because heartache happens in the blink of an eye, doesn't it?

A **spouse** announces "I don't love you anymore"

A **doctor** gives a dreaded diagnosis.

A **bank statement** arrives, describing how broke you are.

A **boss** decides they no longer need your job.

A **parent** dies.

A **child** leaves home, and everything you thought they knew...

We all know that life is full of trouble, don't we?
 Every single one of us is either coming *out* of trouble,
 in the *middle* of trouble,
 or about to *walk into* trouble.

So, we can use a little help on this journey called life—
 And today we're reminded that we can find that in *the Bible*.
 People are in some kind of trouble on almost every page!
 Which means, we can find ourselves in that great Book!

We also find two certain phrases—a lot.
 Do you remember what the angel usually says when he shows up?
 “*Do not be afraid*”
 And there's another 4 word phrase we hear a lot, from God--
 “*I am with you*”.
 These are the words of assurance to people facing *trouble*.

And when faced with trouble,
 there's *one thing* all of our Biblical ancestors relied upon.
 One thing that led them through the tough times.
 In fact, anyone can make it through just about anything
 if you have this thing.
 It's a saving grace, a rock, a firm foundation.

What is it?
 It's *Faith*.
 And Hebrews 11 describes it so well.
 Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for,
 the *conviction* of things not seen.

But I wonder--what does faith *mean to YOU*?
 If someone asked YOU to *define faith*, what would you say?

I'd probably start by saying that the *word faith*—is a lot like the word *Love*.
 We use it a lot, but we don't always capture its true meaning.

And I think we can get it confused with *wishful thinking, or optimism*.
 Wishful thinking dreams about the impossible.
Like hey-maybe the weather in NJ will stay the same all year...

Optimism says that every situation has a silver lining.

So, how is *faith different*?

Faith is not based on dreams, or silver linings,

But on a *person—God*.

Real faith, the kind that Hebrews talks about, is *faith in God*.

And that Faith is not just a noun or something we believe up here (head).

It's a *verb*.

It's *action*.

All of Hebrews 11 is called the "*hall of faith*" because it describes the deep faith of our biblical ancestors—how they acted, how they lived.

How they trusted God.

It's not just what they thought in their minds.

Faith *is living out our beliefs*.

So, how is faith is *a verb*—in YOUR life?

How is faith a part of your *journey*?

Presbyterian Pastor Frederick Beuchner once said in his book *Wishful Thinking*,
Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun,
as a process than as a possession.

It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all.

Faith is not being sure where you're going, but going anyway.

Faith is a journey without maps.

A Journey without maps.

I can relate to that, can you?

Aren't we all on a *journey without a map*...

And *faith is the way* to keep going?

In Joshua chapter 3 there's a great story about faith.

The Israelites needed to cross the flooded *Jordan river* to get into the promised land, but there was a problem....

God told them they had to *first step right into* the raging waters.

Now, *I would have said—wait a minute*,

You're God, right? So part the water like we know you can,

and then we'll step in, ok?

But that's not faith.

And in fact, it is only *after* they got their feet wet that the river began to part, allowing them to walk through on dry land.

That's faith.

It is *active*. It moving forward--*before* seeing how God can help!

Only *after* that initial *step of faith*, right into the raging water...
did they see the miracle of God!

When *have you been asked* to step into the waters of life,
believing that God would help you?

I feel like that describes my move out here from Tulsa, you know?

But I can't tell you how many times I've told God
how much *easier it would be* if I could just see the path!

And every time, I hear the same answer in my heart.

Just keep going, Nat. I've got this. Just keep going.

Faith isn't easy, is it?

But we do have this amazing history of people whose faith can inspire us--

Like our ancestor *Abraham*, who took a huge step of faith when

God asked him to leave his home for a new land.

And God told this 90-year old childless man

that he was going to have countless descendants!

Incredibly, *Abraham took a step of faith*—

not knowing how he was going to get to this new land,

or how on earth he would have any children with his elderly wife.

But *look what God did* for him!

Isaac was born, and Abraham became the Father of Faith!

Faith is believing in something you *can't see*, right?

Faith in God is like believing in the wind, which we can't see,

But we can see *what it does*.

I once read a series called *The Chronicles of the Kings* by Lynn Austin.

She took parts of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Bible

and expanded it to give us an idea of what may have happened

during the reign of Kings like Ahaz and Hezekiah.

She talks about prophets like Isaiah and how they would have spoken to the people.

And in the opening book called *Gods and Kings*, there's a scene where the King is sacrificing to the pagan god named *Molech*—Molech is this gigantic statue with a perpetually open mouth filled with fire—the fire where firstborn sons are sacrificed!

One of the sons who is spared by the evil King Ahaz is *Hezekiah*—a boy who will become a great King one day, but as a child he lives in fear of Molech.

During one poignant scene on a march to Molech, the prophet Isaiah appears, begging the people to turn away from idols and trust in God alone. And it is then that little Hezekiah becomes determined to learn about *real faith* from his grandpa the priest Zechariah.

At one point he asks his Grandpa—*how do you know that our God is real* when you can't even see him? And he explains how we cannot see God, but like the wind, we see what God has done, and created, and how God has worked in people's lives.

Then little Hezekiah asks “*Is Yahweh's mouth always open like Molech's*”? No, Zechariah says, and God doesn't want us to sacrifice firstborn sons, but to follow Him our hearts.

Remember when Abraham went to sacrifice his only son Isaac, it was God who provided the ram instead.

We have a *God who provides*.

Lynn Austin, *Gods and Kings*, Bethany House: Bloomington, MN, 2005, Chapter 8.

That is such an important *lesson* for us today.

Our God is the living God, who *provides* for us no matter what,

For our every need,

For our help in every kind of trouble.

Knowing that in your soul—*that's faith*, right?

In the book called *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, researchers looked at pairs of companies in the same industries that at one time had been fairly *similar*, but where one company had gone from “*good to great*” while the other had been left behind. The goal, of course, was to try to isolate those *principles or practices* that made the difference.

One of those principles came to be known as the *STOCKDALE PARADOX*. It was named for Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was a *prisoner of war* during Vietnam. Collins had interviewed Stockdale at one time and asked him how he was able to live through such a horrible experience, while others *seemingly younger and more fit* wound up dying in the prison.

Stockdale noted that the prisoners who were either *COMPLETE optimists or complete pessimists* had the most trouble surviving. It was the ones like himself with *combined realism and a long view of the future* that finally made it out alive.

In his book, Collins notes that great companies approach their world in a similar way. He calls it the *Stockdale Paradox*:

You must retain faith that *you will prevail* in the end, regardless of the difficulties AND at the same time... You must *confront the most brutal facts* of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Admiral Stockdale woke up every morning and started thinking three things:

- 1) I'm *still* in this horrible place.
- 2) Someday, I'm going to *get out*.
- 3) So, what should I do and *how should I act* today?

"Wishful Thinking, Optimism and Hope," the Rev. Dr. Michael Foss, Day 1, 2007

Have you ever thought of your faith like that?
Of faith being eyes *wide open* to reality,
but believing that *God is at work*, and God will prevail?

What if a deep abiding faith is *realistic*,
And full of *hope* that God's promises are true?

The prophet Habakkuk has some of the most beautiful verses of deep faith. Listen to these words of ***Habakkuk 3:17-19***:

*Though the fig tree does **not blossom**, and **no fruit** is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive **fails**, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights.*

Isn't that amazing?

Though everything looks bleak,
Though we wake up every morning to bad news,
Still we have **hope**.

Why? Because **our God provides**.

And because our God provides, we can have **faith in God**.

It was **this kind of faith** that kept Alexander Solzhenitsyn alive in a moment when he was on the verge of giving up all hope.

While a political prisoner in the Soviet Union, he was forced to work 12 hours a day on a starvation diet; and he became gravely ill.

The doctors predicted his death.

One afternoon, while **shoveling sand** under the blazing sun, he simply stopped working, even though he knew that the guards would beat him severely, possibly to death.

But he felt he could not go on.

Then he saw another prisoner, a fellow Christian, moving toward him cautiously.

With his cane that man quickly **drew a cross in the sand** and then erased it.

In that brief moment, Solzhenitsyn the **hope** of the gospel flood his soul.

Even though the situation had not changed,

it gave him courage to endure that difficult day and the months of imprisonment that followed.

"Wishful Thinking, Optimism and Hope," the Rev. Dr. Michael Foss, Day 1, 2007

How does **YOUR faith keep you going?**

Even when you can't see the way out,

How do hold onto **HOPE?**

In my devotional, ***Streams in the Desert***, on August 4th,

Is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus in John 11,

and how Jesus thanked God for the answer to his prayer
BEFORE he raised Lazarus from the dead—not after.

Ever noticed that?

Jesus *gave thanks first?*

It was an expression of *gratitude, and FAITH.*

*Whoever thinks of announcing a victory as the army is headed out to battle?
Or a song of gratitude before the answer has been received?*

Well, *we do!*

Because we know that God will provide.

Even if we don't know how it will happen.

We have faith.

In Streams, L.B. Cowman recounts how sorrowful he was one day on the mission field. He was overcome with sadness until he walked into a house and saw these words on the wall: *Try giving thanks.*

That's exactly what he did, and the shadows retreated from his heart.

If *Jesus could give thanks before* the miracle of resurrection, we can too!

Because all of our faith is grounded in the *person of Jesus Christ!*

His life, death, and resurrection—is the foundation of our Christian faith!

Because *if God could do that*, God can do anything for us today!

Friends, we have the *ONE thing needed* to make it in this crazy world.

We have *Faith.*

The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Celebrating that gift of faith is our *Good News of the Gospel* today.

And for that, all God's people can say together,

Amen.