

“An Anchor for the Soul: What Is Faith?”

Hebrews 10:37-11:3

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 10, 2016

This morning we come to one of the best known and most loved passages of the entire Bible. And rightly so, I think. Faith is a pretty important concept in Christianity. You will sometimes hear us called “people of faith” or a “faith group.” The word faith is used over 240 times in the New Testament alone and faith was at the center of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century.

The issue is how we are justified or made right with God. Over and over again in the Bible we’re told that we are saved by faith alone. Romans 5:1 says, “since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Galatians 2:16 says, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” And Ephesians 2:8 and 9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” And now in today’s passage from Hebrews: “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

So if faith is the key to preserving our souls, shouldn’t we know what it is? Yet the idea of faith is terribly misunderstood these days, even among Christians! How do you define faith? Many people today would define faith as believing in something for which there is no evidence. Here’s another way to put that. “Faith is believing what you want to believe, yet cannot prove.” Lots of people have that view of faith. For some, it allows them to believe almost anything, making up their own religion as they go along. Critics of Christianity also often use that definition of faith. They would argue that the opposite of faith is *reason* or science and that faith is believing in myths or fairy tales. What IS faith?

Let’s begin with what faith is NOT. Faith is not wishful thinking. It’s not optimism or positive thinking, it’s not a feeling or sentimentality. Faith does not mean believing in

things that don’t exist and faith is certainly not the opposite of reason. Biblical faith is not blind faith. So what IS faith?

“Now faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” At the heart of faith is a tremendous sense of certainty. Not wishing but knowing and trusting. Let me give you an example. The truth is that everybody has faith. You have to. Even the most adamant, vocal atheist operates primarily on faith rather than on scientific observation. There are many things that you can’t see that require faith. As you sit here this morning you aren’t even thinking about whether there’s going to be enough gravity to keep you in your seat or enough oxygen in the air so you can breathe. You simply have faith that those things will continue as they have in the past.

One of my favorite ways of illustrating this is electricity. We had a storm a few weeks ago and many of you were without electricity for part of the time. You don’t really appreciate something until it’s gone. But anyway, here’s the thing. You can’t actually see electricity. It’s invisible. It’s by faith that you turn on the light switch. Unless the power’s out at your house, you have a sense of certainty that the electricity is there and is going to do its thing. That certainty about electricity or oxygen or gravity is not a lack of reason or even science. In fact, your certainty is based on reason and experience. You have faith in gravity because gravity exists!

It’s the same with faith in God. Kent Hughes writes, “True faith...is a solid conviction resting on God’s words that makes the future present and the invisible seen.” We can see that there are two parts to this definition of faith. There is the assurance of things hoped for, a certainty about the future, and there is a certainty about the way things really are even though we can’t see it.

Let’s start with the second half. “Faith is the conviction of things not seen.” The King James version translates it, “faith is the *evidence* of

things not seen.” It’s the proof. It’s by faith that we can understand things the way they really are. This is emphasized in verse 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.”

There was once a family of mice who lived their entire lives inside a large piano. From time to time their home would be filled with the music of the piano. At first, the mice were impressed by the sound. They marveled at it and filled them with awe at the idea that there was someone—invisible to them—who made the beautiful music. Then one day a daring mouse climbed up part of the piano and returned very thoughtful. He had discovered how the music was really made. There were actually wires of different lengths stretched tightly that made the sounds. They began to change their beliefs in the invisible Pianist. Later on other mice investigated and found that the secret was hammers dancing on the strings. This was a much more complicated theory, but they argued that it showed that they lived in a purely mechanical and mathematical world. There was an explanation for everything and so the idea of the Invisible Piano Player came to be thought of as a myth, even though the music continued to play.

There is a strong movement in the world of science today to eliminate the idea of God as creator. The argument is that since we can’t see God with our telescope or microscope, then He doesn’t exist. The problem they face is that science has no answer to the origin of the universe. Using computers they can get pretty close but there is a point in their modeling that all of the laws of physics fail. The “Big Bang Theory” can only get us back to the moment in time just *after* the big bang. No one has been able to figure out what happened the moment before. They can’t answer the question of what *caused* the big bang.

Faith says, “God said, ‘let there be light’ and there was light.” And it made a really big bang. “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.” God created everything in the universe out of nothing by the power of His word.

That brings us to the other part of this definition of faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.” This is a confidence about the future. Rick Phillips writes, “If God’s Word was capable of creating everything out of nothing, then surely that Word is a sufficient ground for our hope. Indeed, if God’s Word was sufficient to bring all that is into existence, it is also sufficient to give me all that I need.”

It’s in the Word of God that we find God’s promises to us, promises that are the source of our hope. God promises our adoption into His family and that our sins are forgiven. He promises that Jesus will return and take us with Him and that we will reign with Him forever. He promises us a new, glorified body free from pain or death. He promises that whenever two or more are gathered in His name that He is present with us. He promises that He will be with us always. And we receive those promises by faith.

The last thing we need to know, then, is how to have that kind of faith. First of all, faith itself is a gift of God. We don’t create our own faith. God gives us faith. Second, Jesus told us that if we have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed nothing will be impossible for us. Finally, how do we have that kind of saving faith? There are three parts to faith. First is *knowledge*. In order to have faith in Christ we need to know who he is. We need to study the Gospels in order to know about Jesus. The second component of faith is *assent*. This is an intellectual assent. We have to acknowledge the truth that we learn. And third is trust. Faith is put into action when we trust Jesus with our life.

Our Old Testament reading from Daniel is a perfect example of this kind of trust. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the ultimate persecution by being thrown into the fiery furnace. They had an opportunity to save themselves. But they firmly trusted in God. They said, “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and

he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." They trusted God with their souls, whether God spared their lives or not. That's real faith.

So what about you? Do you have that kind of faith? God's goal for each one of us is to become the kind of people described in Hebrews 10:34. "You had compassion on those

in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one." Do you have a bold faith that's willing to trust God? Are you certain about the way things are and the way they're going to be? Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.

Amen