

“An Anchor for the Soul: God-Pleasing Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-6

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Who are the heroes in your life? Who are the role models who have inspired you to pursue a certain career or hobby, to push yourself beyond your limits, to be your best? They may not be someone you know personally, although they certainly could be. But your heroes are people you admire and want to be like in some way. One of the things that breaks my heart is to see people today, young and old, idolizing these celebrities who make terrible life decisions and they do it very publicly. Think about all the actors, pop music stars, and athletes who are involved in scandal after scandal. A real hero, I think, is someone who is actually a role model, who not only talks the talk but walks the walk.

Heroes – role models – do serve an important purpose in our lives. They can inspire us to improve by living in a way that really is inspiring. Learning about and watching inspiring people can actually help us learn to live and act in similar ways. Which is one of the reasons we have Hebrews chapter 11. This chapter of the Bible is often referred to as the “Hall of Heroes,” or the “Hall of Faith,” because we are reminded about the faith of some of the great figures in the Old Testament.

If you read all of chapter 11 you’ll find that it basically follows the outline of the Old Testament itself. As we saw last week, it begins with the story of creation 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.” The next verses deal with the faith of those who lived before the great flood, and then we hear about Noah, Abraham and Sara, Moses and so forth, following the history of God’s people. We’re going to look at these over the next few weeks.

But the point of this list is not about the great things that these people accomplished, it’s about the faith that is exhibited in their lives. Verse 6 tells us: “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Remember our definition of faith

from last week: “True faith...is a solid conviction resting on God’s words that makes the future present and the invisible seen.” Today we want to build on our definition of faith so we understand what kind of faith pleases God.

The first person of faith mentioned is Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve. “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.” We just heard the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis 4. I don’t know about you but this story has always kind of bothered me. It says that Cain was a farmer and Abel raised sheep. Then when it was time to bring their offerings to God, Abel brought an animal and Cain brought produce. So why was Abel’s accepted and Cain’s rejected? It’s not because God doesn’t like vegetables.

The key to understanding this is faith. When Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit that God commanded them not to, the penalty was death. We know, however, that Adam and Eve didn’t die right then, but Genesis 3:21 says, “the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” These were the first animals to die and they died to cover Adam and Eve because of their sin. You could say that they were clothed with righteousness by the shedding of blood. Does this remind you of anything?

The entire Bible points us to Jesus. God made provision for the forgiveness of sin and the animal sacrifices were meant to remind the people of their only source of forgiveness – the true sacrifice of Jesus. It’s certain that Cain and Abel knew what kind of sacrifice God expected and Abel brought it. He brought the firstborn of his flock, the most valuable. But more importantly he brought the offering that God expected. Cain, on the other hand, brought something else. He brought something that represented HIS efforts and abilities. He

basically said, “Look what *I* made!” Cain tried to come to God by his own strength, which is never enough. You and I can never please God by our own work. Isaiah 64 reminds us that “all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags.”

Like Frank Sinatra, Cain came to God and said, “I did it *my* way.” But Abel came humbly with authentic worship and obedience. He came knowing that he deserved to die and trusting God. He had the assurance of things hoped for – eternal life with God – and he received it. “he was commended as righteous.” That’s the promise Jesus made by dying on the cross. By faith *we* are clothed with Christ’s righteousness. If you have faith in Jesus, when you stand before God to be judged you will have nothing to fear because you *will be* commended as righteous.

The second person mentioned in Hebrews 11 is Enoch, the seventh generation after Adam. Enoch is interesting for a couple of reasons. The big one is that he never died. Genesis 5 tells us, “When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.” The second thing we’re told about Enoch is that he “walked with God.” The Greek version of the Old Testament that the writer of Hebrews used says that Enoch “pleased God,” but the idea is the same. Walking with God and pleasing God are the same thing.

The idea of walking with God is critically important, especially for our time. We sometimes talk about your “Christian walk” as a way of discussing discipleship. Walking with someone requires a certain level of agreement between the two people who are trying to walk together. The prophet Amos asks, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to meet?” It seems to me there are three things that people must agree to in order to walk somewhere together. First, they must agree on the destination. If you’re not going to the same place you can’t really walk together. When it comes to God, the destination is eternal life

with Him. But even going to the same destination doesn’t mean walking together so the second thing you must agree upon is the path. Which way are we going? Jesus told his disciples, “I am the path or the way.” Finally, if you are going to the same place and traveling on the same path, you still must walk at the same pace.

Walking with God means going where He’s going, the way he’s going, at His pace, not doing it *your* way. Sadly, many people are content to show up and *sit* with Jesus for an hour or so a week instead of *walking* with him every day. Now you might think walking with God is hard. It is. Like any kind of fitness program it’s hard to start. But after a while it becomes a part of your lifestyle. It’s the same here. Walking with God is a lifestyle. You know what’s involved in that lifestyle because we talk about it all the time. Walking with God involves worshiping regularly and passionately. Walking with God means connecting with other believers for encouragement. It means growing in your faith and understanding of God by regularly studying the Bible and praying with other people. And a big part of walking with God is serving other people, being the hands and feet of Jesus. If you can’t name how you do those four things as part of your regular week you need to ask yourself why! Walking with God is the natural expression of faith and without faith it’s impossible to please God.

Our passage ends by pointing us back to the beginning of chapter 11. Verse 6 says, “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” This seems kind of obvious. If you are going to draw near to God you must believe that he exists and that he rewards your seeking. But that is precisely what blocks people from experiencing God. Most people have an idea that some kind of God exists. The scientific evidence alone is overwhelming that God exists. The issue here is believing in God as He is presented to us in the Bible as creator and sustainer of all things, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Hebrews has been pointing into us

from the beginning, the God we must believe in is revealed to us as Jesus of Nazareth. To draw near to God we must believe that He exists. We must have the conviction of things not seen, namely the unseen God.

But we must also believe that He rewards those who seek him. We're not talking about material rewards. This is not prosperity gospel stuff. The reward is God himself! It's the assurance of things hoped for – righteousness;

eternal life. So don't just sit there, get up and walk with God. Make Jesus the most important thing in your life. Worship him with all your heart and mind and soul and strength. Study your Bible and get together with others to study and to pray. And love your neighbors with a sacrificial, serving love. And God will reward you – with Himself!

Amen