

Script: Pastor Frank Johnson

What More Can God Say? (On Hebrews)

“FAITH: The Power of Genuine Faith”

Hebrews 11:1-6

Take a first look.

I. IMAGINE YOURSELF IN SKYDIVING CLASS. [Have any of you done skydiving before?] The instructor is a veteran of over 4,000 free falls. He is describing to you the sensation of dropping through the air and seeing the ground span out before you. He demonstrates the method of operating the parachute, the backup parachute, and how to maneuver yourself so that you land on target. You are satisfied that the whole experience will be safe and exhilarating. So then, the instructor takes you out into the field. Everyone practices the whole process, from putting on the jumpsuit to rolling up the parachute in the proper manner, to 20-foot jumps with practice cords. Everyone is growing in confidence. Finally, the day comes on which you are scheduled to take your first jump. You all check out your parachute carefully, get your gear on, and climb aboard the small aircraft. You go airborne. The plane reaches the right altitude, and you are approaching your jump site. The instructor turns to you all and says, “Do you believe that you are ready for this jump?” All nod in agreement. “Will your parachute carry you safely to the ground?” Unanimous. Everyone nods again. At that very moment, the hydraulic door pops open. The earth appears very distant down below. The instructor turns to you and shouts, “Then jump!”

Here is where faith becomes more than mere belief. After all the truth about skydiving has been rehearsed and accounted for, after someone who has “been there, done that,” reports their whole experience, and you are convinced it is genuine, then there is only one thing left to do: *jump!*

II. FAITH IS A LEAP INTO THE CARE AND PURPOSES OF GOD AS HE HAS MADE HIMSELF KNOWN TO US THROUGH HIS SON JESUS CHRIST. After all the promises of God have been taken into account, after the works of God in history and in personal living have been reviewed, after the right things have been forgotten and the right things remembered, there is only one thing left to do: *jump into His will and purposes for your life.*

III. BY CHAPTER 11, THE WRITER TO THE HEBREWS BRINGS THE OBVIOUS APPLICATION TO ALL THAT HE HAS BEEN TEACHING. Once you have recognized in Jesus Christ God’s final word for humanity, you must decide what you will do about it. Faith is the response of risky trust in Jesus Christ. Now the writer explains what faith is and how the great people throughout salvation history demonstrated it.

Translation: Hebrews 11:1-6

- (1) Now faith is the realization¹ of what we hope for, proof of matters which are not seen.
- (2) For by this the ancient fathers were approved. (3) By faith we understand that the ages were created by God’s word, so that what is visible has come into being not out of what appears.
- (4) By faith, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which He was confirmed to be righteous, God bearing witness on the basis of his gifts, and through it² though

¹ BDAG make a case for this sense for ὑπόστασις.

² That is, his faith.

he died he still speaks. (5) By faith, Enoch was changed so that he did not see death, and he was not found because God changed him. For before this change, he was confirmed to be pleasing to God; (6) now without faith it is impossible to be pleasing [in this way]; for the one coming to God must believe that He exists and that He becomes a Rewarder to those who are seeking Him.

Take a closer look at Hebrews 11:1-6.

I. GENUINE FAITH HAS THE POWER TO GIVE HOPE. vv. 1-2

1. Faith is “being sure of what we hope for.” Now, if hope here meant what we usually mean, there would be no way to be “sure” of it. My lexicon makes out a case for understanding the word differently that is translated here as “being sure” (NIV). Those venerable students of ancient words suggest it should be understood instead as “realization.” That would make the sentence this: “Faith is the **realization** of what we hope for.”

I—“I **hope my class gets out on time tomorrow afternoon. I want to drive over the pass before it gets dark.**” Well, how sure are you of this hope? It all depends on the custom and the character of your professor, doesn’t it? If she is in the habit of letting you out of class on time, then there is moderate certainty that she will do so tomorrow. If she is in the habit of letting you out ten minutes late, then there is little certainty that your hope will be realized. Well, suppose that your professor has assured you today that even though she let you out of class 10 minutes late the past five class sessions, tomorrow she would make it up to you and let you out five minutes early. How certain can you be? Not as certain as the writer here assumes.

Here, the certitude of faith is based on something else entirely. It is not based on our calculations at all. *Faith is a confident response to the character and promises of God.* It has nothing to do with wishful thinking. It has everything to do with our perception of God’s reliable witness to the ultimate outcomes of human experience.

A—We hope in God, put our faith in Him, because we find His promises to be true.
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2. Faith is being “certain of what we do not see.” To the person who has been brought to faith in God through Jesus Christ, there is an inner “proof” of the truth of such a conviction. There are two things “we do not see,” but of which we are convinced when we put our trust in God’s self-revelation in Christ:

a. We don’t see God. We don’t see God in the same way that we see each other. How can we be so certain of Who He is and what He is like?

I—**Remember the story of the four blind men who were all led up to an elephant?** They each described the elephant by what they touched. One touched the trunk and described the elephant as a long, flexible hose-type creature that sprayed water and air. Another held the side of the elephant and described it as a solid and massive animal with huge bulk. Yet another held the elephant by the ear and said, “Oh, no. The elephant is a large, flat, leaf-like creature.” Yet a fourth blind man held the elephant by the leg and described it as a cylindrical animal like the trunk of a large tree.

This is the history of speculation about the nature of God. The philosophers have done their best to describe God, based on their own perceptions, but their testimonies are often contradictory. Rather than basing our faith on such speculation, we instead have God’s *revelation* upon which to stand. God has *revealed Himself* in the person of Jesus Christ.

John 1:18 (NIV): “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

b. We also cannot see the future. Again, which of us can with genuine certainty tell the details about tomorrow? None of us can. Why do we have hope for what we do not yet see? Again, because we cling to the character of God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and we hold steadfastly to His promises. His promise is a clear statement about the future backed up by His faithful character. The remainder of this chapter illustrates why faith is the most sensible response to what we can truly know about God and His actions and ways.

A—This is the first question of application. Do we have genuine faith? Has God enabled us to trust Him for the future without sight of either Him or the future?

I—Consider Philip Yancey’s response to a question from a *New York Times*’ journalist in 2008 when the United States economy had a huge hit:

During one of the most volatile periods of the current economic crisis—a week in which global stock markets declined by *\$7 trillion*—Philip Yancey received a call from an editor at *Time* magazine. The editor’s question was simple: “How should a person pray during a crisis like this?” Here is a summary of what Yancey shared in response:

The first stage is simple, an instinctive cry: “Help!” For someone who faces a job cut or health crisis or watches retirement savings wither away, prayer offers a way to voice fear and anxiety. I have learned to resist the tendency to edit my prayers so that they sound sophisticated and mature. I believe God wants us to come exactly as we are, no matter how childlike we may feel. A God aware of every sparrow that falls surely knows the impact of scary financial times on frail human beings. ...

If I pray with the intent to listen as well as talk, I can enter into a second stage, that of meditation and reflection. Okay, my life savings has virtually disappeared. What can I learn from this seeming catastrophe? ...

A time of crisis presents a good opportunity to identify the foundation on which I construct my life. If I place my ultimate trust in financial security or in the government’s ability to solve my problems, I will surely watch the basement flood and the walls crumble.

A friend from Chicago, Bill Leslie, used to say that the Bible asks three main questions about money: (1) How did you get it? (Legally and justly or exploitatively?); (2) What are you doing with it? (Indulging in luxuries or helping the needy?); and (3) What is it doing to you? Some of Jesus’ most trenchant parables and sayings go straight to the heart of that last question³

II. GENUINE FAITH HAS THE POWER TO BRING UNDERSTANDING. v. 3

1. *Faith helps us understand the creative power of God’s command.* “By faith we understand” is one of the most compelling clauses in Christian teaching. There is no ultimate contradiction between faith and reason, or between faith and science, if we understand what science really is. Science is the disciplined study of what is available to the senses. This is why certain of what we call the sciences, Behavioral Science for example, can never be finished. The roots of genuine science, often called Modern Science, are planted securely in a Christian view of the world. The beginning point and the conclusion is that an Intelligent Designer created the world and everything in it. We can read “the book of nature” (as Kepler and others reasoned) because the Author of both the book of nature and the book of Scripture are one and the same Intelligent, self-revealing Creator.

³ Philip Yancey, “A Surefire Investment,” www.christianitytoday.com/ct (2-3-09).

2. *Faith helps us understand that the visible is made of the invisible.* Here the writer affirms that both matter and energy are creations of God, that both the visible items such as wood and metal and the invisible particles of neutrons and electrons and protons in the atom are expressions of the creative genius of God.

A—The writer gives us here a framework upon which to approach the world and our place in it.

I—Once upon a time a Master Craftsman decided to create his very own musical instrument. Having studied on the piano as a young man, he plied all his skill and crafted a beautiful upright piano. It was the crowning achievement of his life's work. Over time, a family of mice came to live in the bottom of this beautiful upright piano. They spoke often of the musical mystery that surrounded their lives. Generations passed on tales of the Master Musician who played the Great Music. One day, one of the mice became extremely curious. He found a way to climb up into the piano. He came back with a very somber look on his face. He said, "I have been up into the piano. I have discovered that there is no mystery at all. The music comes from small hammers tipped with felt that crash randomly against tight wires of different widths. As these various hammers bump into the wires, they produce the music we hear from time to time." The whole family of mice was disheartened. Their mystery was solved. Their lives took on a dismal and pathetic monotony. But the Master Craftsman continued to play.

But what if the Master Musician could become a mouse? What if He could climb down into the very bottom of the piano and bring a message to the mouse family? Indeed, this is the truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Faith leads us to understand that the Master Musician of the cosmos is still playing His masterpiece. The materialist only sees the mechanics of the instrument, not the One Who sits at the console playing His music. Faith sees beyond the mechanics to the Musician.

III. GENUINE FAITH HAS THE POWER TO MAKE HUMAN OFFERINGS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD. v. 4

1. *Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did because of his faith.* This is a helpful interpretive passage for the story found in the book of Genesis. It was not primarily the *offering* but rather the *person* giving the offering that made it acceptable or unacceptable. Why was Abel's sacrifice "better" than Cain's? Because his was offered "by faith."

2. *His faith still bears witness to Christians today.* "Through faith, he still speaks."

A—Here is his witness to us: we must offer to God our very best, not because He is selfish or capricious, but because He is worthy to receive the best we have to offer, and He will receive whatever we offer Him from a sincere heart of true faith.

I—In a book entitled *Blessed Are You Who Believed*, Carlo Carretto, described the various offerings of the sacrificial life of faith and their basis in the work of God through Jesus Christ: "When the world seems a defeat for God and you are sick with the disorder, the violence, the terror, the war on the streets; when the earth seems to be chaos, say to yourself, 'Jesus died and rose again on purpose to save, and his salvation is already with us.'

"Every departing missionary is an act of faith in the resurrection.

Every peace treaty is an act of faith in the resurrection.

Every agreed commitment is an act of faith in the resurrection.

When you forgive your enemy

When you feed the hungry
When you defend the weak
 you believe in the resurrection.
When you have the courage to marry
When you welcome the newly-born child
When you build your home
 you believe in the resurrection.
When you wake at peace in the morning
When you sing to the rising sun
When you go to work with joy
you believe in the resurrection.”⁴

IV. GENUINE FAITH HAS THE POWER TO BRING GREAT REWARD TO US. vv. 5-6

1. *Enoch did not experience death as a reward for walking with God.* This man’s story is short in the history of salvation. He appears in Genesis 5:21-24. It says there, “Enoch walked with God 300 years....” And then the mystery of the next part of his story: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.”

A—How long do we plan to walk with God?

I—Until the gravy runs out? Until the bombs quit exploding around our foxholes? Until the job ends or the relationship ends or the health turns for the worse? I don’t mean to be hardhearted here, but we must face such questions. Why are we walking with Him in the first place? Is it only because of what we get out of Him, or is it because He is truly our Creator, Redeemer, and Friend?

2. *There are two requirements for pleasing God:*

a. “Believe that God exists.” There is no reward promised for those who do not even believe that God exists.

b. Believe “that He rewards those who ... seek Him.” There is no reward promised for those who take a casual and half-hearted approach to knowing Him, or even for the “practical atheist,” who may say that s/he believes in God but lives as though God is not there.

Take it home (applications).

I. Where are we on that simple grid of faith and pleasing God?

1. Believe that He exists?
2. Believe that it is worth it in the end to seek Him?

II. How do we need to demonstrate our faith today?

1. Confession of faith, baptism, church membership?
2. Express the confessional life in acts of love and service?
3. Pray—and keep on praying—for someone you care for who needs the grace and truth of Jesus as much as we do?

⁴ Carlo Carretto in *Blessed Are You Who Believed*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 4.