

## Hebrews 11:1-7

I don't know how well you know the letter to the Hebrews, but I have to admit that it is not one of the most read books in my experience. The book of Hebrews was written more than 19 centuries ago by an unknown apostolic leader. We do not know who he was, but we do know from this book that he was a faithful teacher and loving pastor. It was sent as a written sermon, what the writer calls a "Word of exhortation", to a group of early believers struggling with difficulty and persecution and tempted to give up. It was probably written at a time when Christianity was going from been seen as a part of Judaism, which was permitted in the Roman Empire, to being a separate religion which had to be stamped out. The temptation was there for Christians to take the easy option, to go back to the Jewish faith. So the pastor gives encouragement to hold on. And of course there is a temptation for believers in every generation, including our own, to find an easier path. Then as now these

examples of faith give strength to all of us who struggle to go on believing; those who like those early believers hold fast to Christ and who long for a life of victorious Christian faith. Our goal in looking at Hebrews chapter 11 is well summed up by the writer in the words we read a moment ago from chapter 10:

**"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."** (10:23,24)

In the first 10 chapters the writer has pointed his Hebrew readers to Christ.

- The fulfilment of the OT law
- The one who is superior to Moses, Aaron, the angels
- The One who offers a superior covenant and who is THE sacrifice to cleanse from sin

In view of Christ's supremacy, he urges his readers to hold fast to the faith in the face of persecution. And it is at this point that we come to chapter 11, where he explains what faith is

and gives us examples of men and women who lived by faith. The Christian life is the life of faith, and Hebrews 11 is the chapter which explains in greatest detail what faith is all about. I hope we will find, over the next few weeks that it is enjoyable and purposeful.

As we are reminded in 10:39, Christians are people who have faith – otherwise we would not be Christians at all. But the Epistle to the Hebrews is full of warnings that some people's faith has not lasted. Like the seed which Christ told about in the parable of the sower, when times of difficulty and persecution arose, their faith withered. Sadly, both as individuals and as a fellowship we know people who seemed to be going on with the Lord, but who have now "given up", and I think that this is one of the saddest things we encounter in our Christian lives.

Chapter 11 begins by telling us something about the nature and quality of faith (verses 1-3). It is not meant to be a complete definition of

faith, simply what he wanted his people to be aware of in their particular situation.

**He tells us 3 things:**

**Faith accepts God's word**

**Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see (11:1)**

Faith is our response to what God has said. It takes seriously what God has said in his word. It not only accepts it as true, it acts upon it. Our writer says 2 things in particular:

Faith anticipates the future. It does not depend on things we can see with our eyes. As we will see when we look at the faithful characters portrayed in this chapter, they all did more than live for the passing moment. Life for them was a pilgrimage and they were passing through. They knew that there were better things ahead because God, in one way or another had told them so. And they chose to believe God's word rather than the promises of the world around them.

Secondly, faith gives a different evaluation of the present. People without faith are more

likely to accept things as they are. If money comes their way, it is simply theirs to enjoy. If an opportunity for sensual pleasure comes along, they will likely take it without considering immediate consequences or long-term effects. But the man or woman of faith looks beyond the situation as seen by natural vision or physical appetite. They do not just look at the circumstances; they see God at work and are able to endure.

### **Faith wins God's approval**

**For by it the men of old received divine approval (11:2)**

The people of old made their response to God's word and thus gained His approval. Without faith (1:6) it is impossible to please God. For the Christian, pleasing God is surely of the greatest importance. It has got to be more important than gaining human approval. This reminds me of Jesus' words to people who did their religious worship just in order to gain the approval of others: "They have received their reward in full". In other words, the pleasure

they gain from other people's praise is the only reward they will gain. The man or woman of faith realises that human approval, though pleasant, can also be dangerous, and looks instead to God for His approval.

### **Faith recognises God's power**

**By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible (11:3)**

Ours is a time committed to atheism, to a view of history and of the universe which excludes any possibility of God. As far as the origin of the universe is concerned, The Big Bang has taken over the role of God. But that begs the question of what caused the Big Bang.

Something beyond a physical reality is needed to explain the universe and the Bible takes us back to before time, to the God who calls things into being by the power of His word.

It is also true that faith recognises God at work in our own lives and sees the Spirit at work in God's people. The world at large does not recognise God at work. If a church grows and

lives are changed, the world puts it down to psychological techniques. Faith sees God at work

We come now to 3 men who are examples of faith; Abel, Enoch and Noah.

**Abel** Faith brings us into a right relationship with God

**Enoch** Faith walks with God

**Noah** Faith works

**Abel**

READ Genesis 4:1-9

Our text in Hebrews tells us that, because of faith, Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's. Abel was a man of faith, Cain was not. God receives the man of faith, and therefore his offering, but rejects the man who lacks faith. Paul gave the same message in Romans 14:23: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."

And in Galatians 5:6 he adds:

"The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

God makes the same offer to Cain as He does to Abel in the verses we read in Genesis, but warns him that "sin crouches at the door". It's a very graphic picture, is it not? It is as if there is a lion crouched at the door, ready to spring, but it only gets the opportunity to attack if we open the door.

Cain's offering may have been very beautiful, even artistic, but it lacked the one thing which really mattered, a heart offered to God in faith. Abel, though killed by his brother in a moment of unspeakable evil, speaks to each generation about its motivation in worship. Is our outward offering of worship, money and service a genuine expression of our love and commitment? God sees not only the value of the offering, but the heart of the giver. Abel also speaks to all who will listen by pointing to the most important offering of all. Hebrews chapter 12 verse 24 refers to the "sprinkled blood of Christ" which "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" This refers back to Genesis 4 where God says to Cain

**“Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground”**

It is a better word because Abel was the helpless victim of sudden hate. Christ’s voluntary sacrifice was planned and approved by God and it is by accepting his sacrifice that we find our way back to God.

**“By faith Abel was declared to be righteous”.**

Before the time of Christ, Abel spoke of a sacrifice still to come which would take away sin, of faith in the sacrifice that declares the sinner righteous. Now that Christ has come, he continues to speak, but even more clearly.

### **Enoch**

READ Hebrews 11:5

The account of Enoch’s life in Hebrews makes no mention of his faith. But it does give rise to the statement that without faith it is impossible to please God. The idea is that we can be sure that Enoch was a man of faith, because otherwise he could not have pleased God.

In fact, we know very little about Enoch except that he walked with God and that God “took

him”, in other words he did not die in the normal way but went straight to be with God. One day he was there, the next day he was not. People may well not have known what happened to him, but we know because God gives us the inside story.

Enoch’s “epitaph” is that he walked with God. Not bad! It does not mean that he was perfect. Remember David, the man after God’s own heart, who nevertheless let God down badly. But it does mean that the whole tone of his life was fellowship with God.

What does it mean to walk with God? It speaks of fellowship, companionship, and increasing understanding and an agreement of mind and heart.

**“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”** asks the prophet Amos.

When we walk with God it is not a relationship of equals. It is a father/son, teacher/disciple relationship. But it is a picture of what the Christian life is meant to be. Walking with God means that every day – difficult days, ordinary

days, happy days – are days with God, a foretaste of what heaven will be like. It means being with God, knowing His love, seeing His light and enjoying the warmth of His pleasure.

Finally we come to **Noah**.

There are few people who are as well known as Noah. So many homes where there are small children have a Noah's ark. Noah has become the patron saint of conservation.

There are also few people about whom there is so much speculation. There is no doubt at all that the flood was a real event. Even those who do not accept the authority of the Bible are faced with the fact that there so many hundreds of flood stories from all over the world. There are many unanswered questions, but this evening I would like us to concentrate on Noah's faith.

Noah is certainly a great example of a man who believed in things unseen. He believed that God would send a flood and he believed that he would be saved if he built the ark.

Noah did not have one shred of evidence that there would be a flood. God asked him to build a boat, the like of which had never been seen, far away from any ocean or sea.

Compared with Noah, you and I have it easy. God asks us to accept by faith that Jesus lived, died and rose again, events which happened in the full gaze of history and are recorded for us in the Bible.

Noah had to believe in things which had never happened and seemed very unlikely..

Noah shows us that faith always results in actions. Some people are puzzled by the relationship between the two, partly because there is a paradox if we take a verse from Paul's teaching and a verse from James' teaching and put them side by side. Paul tells us that:

**“We are declared righteous in Christ apart from works”.**

James tells us that

**“Faith without works is dead”**

But there is no contradiction. Paul teaches us that we are made right with God through faith alone. James teaches us that true faith inevitably does good works; otherwise it is not true faith. As John Calvin wrote, works flow from faith as water flows from a fountain. People no doubt thought that Noah had taken leave of his senses. The ark would have been a great source of amusement to all and sundry. And Christian faith today can seem nutty to an age as self-absorbed as ours. You want to deny yourself, devote yourself to a God you cannot see ... and you talk of self-sacrifice rather than self-fulfilment ... and loving your enemies ... you must be mad.

Noah's faith in action was a rebuke to the people around who did not believe. And so it is in every generation. Sometimes we have the privilege of knowing fellow-Christians who, by the quality of their Christian lives and their authenticity cause us to examine our own lives and draw us closer to the Lord.

The secret of Noah's life is found in 3 little snippets in Genesis 6:

- Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord (8)
- Noah walked with God (9)
- Noah did everything just as God commanded him (22)

The three people we have looked at this evening give us an insight into the importance of faith.

There was **Abel**, who shows us the need for faith to bring us into a right relationship with God by trusting in Him for salvation

Then there was **Enoch** who walked in a close relationship with God and enjoyed fellowship with God.

And then there was **Noah**, who shows us that real faith leads to practical good deeds.

Each of these characters from the Bible points us to the same God whom they worshipped and calls us to the same victorious faith which shaped their lives.