

August 7, 2016  
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Hebrews 11:1-3,

## What is Faith?

Faith. What is faith? The word faith is one of those churchy terms that can get tossed about as if it's something everyone understands, as if it's a word that doesn't need further explanation. But I think the meaning of faith is not something to simply assume—that, in fact, what faith is, how faith is experienced, is different than how it is sometimes defined. What is faith? The book of Hebrews says this: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I think that definition suggests that this abstract concept, faith, is actually more subtle, and more interesting, than how it is sometimes defined—and more challenging.

Hebrews itself is a challenging book—the name Hebrews might make it sound like it's in the Old Testament, but it's not. The book of Hebrews is not in the Old Testament, it's in the New Testament, near the end. Like many of the books at the end of the New Testament, it calls itself a letter, but it's not a letter like other letters in the New Testament, those letters that were written to specific congregations in specific places: Galatia, Corinth, Thessalonica. This letter—or, more accurately with Hebrews, this philosophical treatise—has a much more general audience. It could have been written, as its name suggests, to people of Hebrew origin, but it's written in an elevated and erudite Greek. It also tackles challenging and complicated subjects: the divinity of Christ, the relationship of God's covenant with Israel and the appearance of Christ, and today's topic, faith. What is faith?

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Two things about this definition stand out to me, both of which are in some contrast to the way that faith is sometimes defined.

First, there is the matter of certainty. I think sometimes faith is thought of as synonymous with certainty. To have faith is to know, to have the answers—and to be able to tick those answers off. Faith then becomes a closed set of propositions to which one makes verbal assent. This can be done with varying degrees of sophistication. In cruder variations it comes across as "that's what it says, that's how it is." But even Christians who try to take a more nuanced approach can fall prey to this inaccurate definition of faith: faith a matter of repeated phrases or loud announcements.

It should be admitted that something that we do here, in this very church, the recitation of the creeds, may in fact encourage this erroneous definition of faith: as if faith is a matter of mental agreement with a series of statements. That's not faith, and that's not the point of saying the creeds. To recite an historic creed of the Christian church is to be part of a community of people who, across continents, and centuries, continues to come together to affirm that God is. That's what the creeds are, and do, and say. That God is. That God is one, and God is three, that God creates, and redeems, and sustains—that's what the community that has called itself Christian comes together to say, when they say the creeds. The creeds are not about are not what any one person agrees to think on a particular Sunday morning. That's not faith.

For faith is not a matter of individual intellectual assent, faith is not defined by mental certainty, not according to Hebrews. Faith is not about a person making a list of certain statements. Certainly, there is certainty in the definition that Hebrews gives for faith: Faith is assurance, faith is conviction. But look at the object of those certain feelings—the object of

certainty, is uncertainty! The object is “things hoped for,” “things not seen,” things that cannot be pinned down, or definitively described. There is certainty, but it is certainty in and about the unknown. The certainty is that there is more than we understand, a world we cannot see, a future still being formed. That is what it means to have faith: to profess that we do not know all there is. We are certain of that—and, we are certain, the more that we don’t know means more, offers more, than the things we know. The certainty is all in possibility.

A second difference than the perhaps typical definition of faith has to do with a matter of timing. I think that sometimes faith is understood as something that occurs at a decisive moment. So, then, questions may be formulated such as, “When did you come to faith?” or “When were you saved?” Certainly, there are times in one’s life that are turning points. Sometimes, for some people, there are dramatic shifts, key occasions when one changes how one understands oneself and God. These times are important, they can be life-changing, but in the end, they are all relative. There is a decisive moment of faith, one truly decisive moment: the cross. That’s when we were saved. The cross shows faith: God’s faithfulness, God’s love for all that is greater even than death. We come to faith when we respond to God’s love in kind. We come to faith, again and again, as we live in the knowledge that God’s faithful action is decisive, with ongoing effect on and with us.

Accordingly, the definition from Hebrews does not speak of faith as a climactic shift on our part, but as a constancy of confidence. Faith is assurance; faith is conviction; faith is not a moment, but an attitude. Faith is hopeful. Faith is confident. Faith trusts that what we do not know, what we cannot see, the future still to come, is nothing less than the coming of God’s kingdom. Faith trusts that God will continue the good work that was begun in the creation and redemption of the world, and in us, that God’s spirit is still moving, still sustaining. As it says in another part of the New Testament, in faith we are “confident, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion.” To have faith is to live in that positive possibility, to be convinced of God’s good intentions for us and for all of creation.

So it is that the very opposite of faith is fear. And it is this that is the great challenge of faith: faith calls us to leave behind fear—leave it behind, as a country we no longer live in. This is a great challenge. It is so much more familiar, the country called fear. It feels so much safer to make decisions out of fear. It is so much easier, and crowd rousing, to speak to fear. It makes so much sense to feel fear: we see what goes on; our sheepish minds are wired for wariness.

But over and over again, God’s people are told, “Do not fear.” “Do not be afraid, little flock,” “Do not be afraid, Abram.” And Abraham has faith; Abraham is an example of faith, Hebrews says. Abraham had only the certainty of a starry sky, of things hoped for, of numerous descendants, not seen. Abraham’s faith may have crystalized one night, but it played out across years, and miles, across foreign countries, a continued confidence. Abraham set out in faith, Hebrews say, “not knowing where he was going.” Years after Abraham, his faith continued in his descendants: his children, Isaac, Jacob, and now us, all of us children of Abraham, children by faith, called to faith, called to be defined by faith, defined by positive possibility, ongoing confidence in what God is and what God is doing, defined by “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”