

Hebrews 10:35-11:3
(John 3:1-16)
“Faith That Endures”

Introduction

How are we to continue to trust God when life takes from us the things that brought us greatest joy, the very things that seemed to us to be the visible manifestations of his love and mercy toward us? Where in your life are you most tempted this morning not to trust the promises of God?

The author of Hebrews calls to us across the centuries as he called to his first century readers with the challenge, “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (10:35-36). This is the often-neglected context of the well-known verses that we are studying together this morning.

The chapter division is unfortunate – remember it was not there in the original work. Hebrews 11 is often referred to as “the role call of the heroes of faith,” but it was written to illustrate the verses just quoted. Why should I hold fast to God’s promises, why should I seek to endure, when my world is falling apart? Three key reasons are given in the first three verses of chapter eleven:

By faith we are able to stake our lives on God’s promises.

By faith we are able to receive God’s commendation.

By faith we are able to understand the nature of God’s world.

Body

1. By faith we are able to stake our lives on God’s promises (11:1).

Unless we read this verse in the context of what has already been written, it will simply sound like wishful thinking, like a decision to believe whatever we wish regardless of evidence to the contrary. But the context points to the promises God has made to his people through his prophets and apostles, recorded in the Scriptures. The call is to rest our hope in the truth of God’s promises and in the power of God to fulfill them.

So, what promises does the author have in mind? Given the situation of his original readers, he is addressing those promises that address us in seasons of suffering and loss, and that assure us that God will use all such things for his glory and for our good.

For example: He quotes the prophet Habakkuk, his move from fear to faith.

2. By faith we are able to receive God's commendation (11:2).

We think of ourselves as having to do things to win God's approval. But the author wants us to remember that what God most desires of us is what we most desire of our children: namely, that they believe us, that they trust us, and that their actions be an expression of that trusting relationship, rather than an expression of a fear that we cannot be trusted, that we don't have their best in view and that they must attempt to win our love and approval.

For example: Saul versus David, Charles Templeton versus Billy Graham.

3. By faith we are able to understand the nature of God's world (11:3).

It is only by faith that we can know anything. The great Augustine saw that this verse was crucial to understanding the proper relationship between faith and knowledge. The so-called Age of Enlightenment in the west, that emphasized reason above revelation and accepted scientific method as the chief way of attaining true knowledge, saw faith as something private, something unrelated to knowledge. But by the mid-20th century, philosophers and scientists began to understand afresh Augustine's observation that all knowledge rests upon faith. And this is precisely what our author says: "By faith we understand ..." Every field of knowledge, even mathematics, rests upon certain un-provable axioms that must be presupposed – or, accepted on faith – in order to learn and understand and work within that particular field.

It is also only by faith that we can know the meta-narrative (the big story) that makes sense of history and of all our personal stories. It is only through faith that we can begin to understand the meaning of life and the nature of reality.

Conclusion

Our author will go on to write, "And without faith it is impossible to please [God]" (11:6). This is the way that ordinary folk like you and me are enabled by God's grace to become those who stand in the face of whatever comes, because we have trusted and entrusted our lives and our destinies to one who loved us and gave himself for us, and who has promised us that all things work together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28), and that the day is coming when he will wipe away our tears and make all things new (Revelation 20:4-5). Apart from faith, life is hopeless, but those who walk by faith live in the hope of God's promises to his people, looking forward to the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:21). Until that day, through faith we understand the nature of this world in which we live and move and have our being.

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