

Jesus: Our Great Promise

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Date: 13 March 2016

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- [0 : 00] Please do have a seat and let's pray together. Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. Father God, we're here this morning, some of us worried and anxious about a great many things, and yet help us choose what is better just now, to sit at your feet, to hear your word, and to be moulded and shaped for your glory. Father, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So we finally arrived at Hebrews chapter 11. It is definitely the most famous chapter in Hebrews. So far it's been pretty tough going. We've really been stretched as we've done this series. We've been stretched about what we knew about the Old Testament, what we knew about the Old Covenant. We've seen lots of things, but it's not been easy. And so Hebrews 11 is what many would think a nice oasis of calm in the middle of quite a doctrinally rich book.
- [1 : 13] I dare say it is many of our favourite chapters. 40 verses, 16 named characters, 14 men, 2 women, dozens of other anonymous ancients mentioned. We've got some big hitters like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Samuel, but also some awkward inclusions like Jephthah, Barak, and Samson. If we were trying to name our 16 most influential Old Testament characters, I don't think Jephthah, Barak, or Samson would even be on the first three pages of A4. It's the most common chapter, I think, in the whole Bible to be taken out of context. So many people would preach Hebrews 11 as some kind of hermetically sealed series all by itself. I don't know who listens to what radio station. Does anyone listen to Radio 3? Gary, well done. Well done, brother.
- [2 : 15] Does anyone listen to Classic FM? A few more. And there's this big debate between Classic FM and Radio 3 because Radio 3 will play whole works. They'll play entire symphonies, whole movements of a piece, whereas Classic FM just play all the popular bits. And when it comes to Hebrews 11, we're very tempted to be like Classic FM and just pluck it out and this is our favourite bit, let's concentrate on this and completely remove it from the book of Hebrews. We go through it in forensic detail, treating it like some sort of Old Testament overview roadmap or like God's Old Testament Panini sticker album where we've got all the shiny favourites on the pages. If we see it as that, as some kind of biblical hall of fame, we'll definitely say something, but I'm not sure we'll say what the writer to the Hebrews is trying to say to us. So let's just recap our context. Hebrews is written to a Jewish body of Christians.
- [3 : 25] And their problem is that they are drifting. They're drifting from what they once knew and how to. They're kind of disillusioned with the church.

They're disappointed. And they're really on the brink of defecting. Of defecting from the church, discarding Christianity and disposing of Jesus.

They're in real danger of turning back. In real danger of turning back to what was once familiar to Judaism. So the writer has given them 10 weighty chapters showing that Jesus is better.

Better. He's better. He is better in every way. He brings a better message.

He inaugurates a better covenant. He is a better sacrifice. He's a better priest. He brings us into better rest. He offers a better cleansing, a fuller cleansing, a conscience cleansing cleansing.

[4 : 30] He is better in every conceivable way. He has been trying to show that the Old Testament was a shadowy counterfeit teaching aid. And now the real lesson has arrived in his name is Jesus.

In Jesus, they've gained everything and lost nothing. It is the ultimate win-win that wins over all other win-wins. Jesus is better.

It's almost as if, and I know some people here have had cataracts removed. It's like they went through the surgery, had the cataracts removed, were seeing everything properly, and then they've gone, oh, it's a bit bright.

It's a bit clear. Please could I have reverse surgery? I quite like those cataracts back. I quite like that kind of shadowy aura that comes around things that I used to be able to make up clearly.

They're really tempted to turn back. And why are they tempted to turn back? Well, even in the immediate context of Hebrews 11, we see some of the things.

[5 : 37] Suffering. Just before in chapter 10, it's talked about all the ways that they've suffered. They've had people put in prison.

They've suffered property being taken. They've been ridiculed. They've suffered. What else? Well, the other end of the book, and we get chapter 12, shame.

They feel shame. The society laughs at them and mocks them for believing in Jesus. And sin, they're struggling against sin.

It all seems so difficult to lead a holy life. And they've lost so much solidity. Chapter 9 and 10 was all about the very tangible, very visible trappings of Old Testament Judaism.

We could go to an actual priest to offer an actual sacrifice at an actual temple. It all was so hands-on. And now it seems that we've lost all of that.

[6 : 37] And we've just got Jesus. And so they're tempted to turn back. Now for us, we're also tempted to turn back, but none of us are tempted to go back to Judaism.

But I dare say, when these things come across us, we're tempted to go back to the world, tempted to go back to our life before Jesus. When we suffer for Jesus, when we're ashamed of Jesus, and it gets tough.

When sin seems so attractive, and God seems so far away, and it all just seems so up there, and we're living down here. Familiar, tempted to turn back, that's where they are.

And so he ends chapter 10, verse 39, with these words. But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed. That's really what's at stake.

But to those who have faith, and are saved. We're not shrinkers, we're endures, we're perseverers.

[7 : 41] We are those who have faith, and are saved, which really gives us what Hebrews 11 is about. It is about what saving faith looks like.

He could have given us this abstract discussion about what true biblical saving faith looks like. But he hasn't. He's given us example after example of what saving faith looks like, from people that they're really familiar with.

He's given us a huge wad of worked examples. He says, you're tempted to turn back, what's the antidote? Well, it's faith. It's saving faith. What does that saving faith look like?

Well, let me tell you about some guys that you're familiar with. So verses 1 to 3 really give the big theme. And I think if we get these, then we get a lens to look at all of these characters with, and see what brings them all together.

If you've got a Bible, Hebrews 11 verse 1. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see.

[8 : 52] This is what the ancients were commended for. 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.

He gives us what saving faith looks like. Faith in this context, saving faith is confidence about what we hope for. It is faith in the future.

It is forward-looking faith. It is faith that looks onward. And it is an assurance about things we do not see. It is also an upwards faith.

It is faith in who God is and what God says to us. Now what does saving faith look like? Well, it is a faith that looks onwards and a faith that looks upwards.

That's what he's honing in on. How are they not going to be those that turn back? Well, they're going to be those with faith who look onwards and look upwards. So let's see if that's right.

[10 : 01] If I've got that right, then we should see that everywhere. Look at chapter 11, verse 6. And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Do you see that? He rewards those. There's a future promise. There's an onwards dimension, and it is upwards. It is those who earnestly seek him, those who draw near to him.

Anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Look at chapter 11, verse 10, talking about Abraham, for he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Again, he's looking forward to this city. He's looking onward, and he's looking upward, knowing that God built it. Chapter 11, verse 13 to 16.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things that promised onward. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

[11 : 14] People who say such things show that they are looking for a country not their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. They would have turned back, but they were forward-looking in faith.

Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Onwards and upwards. It's everywhere when you get into it. I had a real eureka moment this week when I saw that. You see it in chapter 11, verse 24. By faith, Moses didn't stay in Egypt.

He looked forward. Why? Because he counted disgrace for the sake of Christ. Or chapter 11, verse 35. In this anonymous list of all these people, that they might gain an even better resurrection.

Faith in Hebrews 11 is everywhere. And the faith in view is faith that looks onwards, and faith that looks upwards.

[12 : 22] How are we not going to be those who turn back where we're going to have onward-looking faith, and upward-looking faith? This is so potent to the people that are reading Hebrews.

What are they tempted to do? They're tempted to go back. Who do they hope to meet back there? Well, they would like to meet Moses and Abraham. They feel secure and comfortable with them.

But the writers of the Hebrews are saying, don't turn back because they're ahead of you. They're ahead of where you are because they have this faith that looks onwards, and faith that looks upwards.

It's like these Hebrews are running a 10K. And they go, oh, I'll just wait for them. The strange thing is that they're well ahead. They're at the finish line cheering them on.

Cheering them on to keep looking forward to Jesus and keep looking upward to God. They're well ahead. So don't turn back. Faith does, in Hebrews, look onward, and it looks upward.

[13 : 24] And if we get that lens in our eyes, we'll see it clearly. And we'll see it everywhere. If you like, faith is believing who God is, obeying what God says, trusting what God promises.

That's what it means to have faith according to Hebrews 11. And so we get the first worked example, verse 3, It is 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 invisible.

It is by faith. God told us that he created the world by the power of his voice. It links right back into what he said in chapter 1, verse 1 to 4.

He's told us, therefore, we can believe it. It is by faith we understand that this God who speaks to us spoke a powerful word and made everything that is seen out of what was not seen himself.

And so we get some embryonic faith. In these verses 4 to 7. If you want a really good word, a word of the week, the word antediluvians.

[14 : 38] If somebody says to you, what were you looking at at church this morning, say, antediluvians. It means they will never turn up. Antediluvians before flood people, and that's what we get in verses 4 to 7.

There's three of them. First of all, we get Abel. And what's Abel? Well, he's somebody who brings a better sacrifice. Why is it a better sacrifice? Because he brings it in faith.

As opposed to his brother Cain, who just brings it. Abel brings the fat portions from the first fruits of the flock. Cain just brings some fruits from the earth.

It makes Cain very jealous. And Cain kills Abel. But we see that Abel commences with faith. He comes to God in faith.

That's how it starts. And we see it continues to look forward because Abel still speaks. He's still speaking. Even though he's departed from this earth.

[15 : 40] And then we get Enoch, this kind of mysterious character in Genesis 5. Genesis 5 is quite depressing. Because it says, so-and-so lived so-and-so, and then he died.

And then so-and-so lived this long, and he died. And it goes on and on and on and on. And right in the middle, in verse 22, we get Enoch, who says that he walked pleasing to God.

He walked in obedience to God, and therefore God took him to be with himself. And so we get this picture of Enoch walking in faith.

He's continuing in obedience. A faith that trusts what God has promised and obeys what God says and draws close to God in communion, which is that Hebrew word to walk together.

And then we get Noah. What a bastion of faith Noah, this preacher of righteousness, is. Verse 7, by faith, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.

[16 : 43] By faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. You're a knower. You live in the desert.

It's not really rained yet. God says, please build an ark because there's a flood coming. And the first thing you do is you go to B&Q; and you say, I'd like all the gopher wood you've got. And it's delivered on the Wix truck.

I don't know why B&Q; are working together with Wix, but I've never seen a B&Q; truck. And so it's delivered. And all your neighbors are going, you're insane, Noah. And him and Shem and Ham and Japheth have got their dungarees tied around their waist.

And they're sweating and they're building and they're checking the blueprints. And they're all going, Noah, you're insane. Why are you building an ark? Because God told me.

Well, who is your God? Well, he's one who looks at all your wickedness and is not pleased. And so why are you building an ark? Because there's floods coming and it's the only way to be safe. That's real faith, isn't it?

[17 : 42] That God says something. They obey. Why? Because they trust what God says about the future. And so when they go into the ark, they are safe. They condemn the world because they obeyed.

And everyone else did it. He became an heir of righteousness. He had a faith that looked onward and a faith that looked upward. And so we see even in these antediluvians, we see how does it start with Abel?

Well, it starts by faith. How does it continue? Well, it continues like Enoch, walking in obedience to God. And how does it end? Well, it ends in faith, just like Noah, who becomes the heir of righteousness.

They believed who God is. They obeyed what God said. They trusted what God promised. And once we get this lens, we see it everywhere. We see it in Abraham's enduring faith.

By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

[18 : 51] Abraham's in error of the Chaldeans. He's worshipping the moon and the sun. And God says, I've got an inheritance for you. Go. And he goes, well, I'm not sure where it is. But come on, everyone, let's pack the suitcase we're going.

That's real faith. It's a faith that does something. He lives in this promised land. Why? Because he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder was God.

Then we get his wife, Sarah, in verse 11. She's told at age about 90, you're going to have a baby. And what does she do? Well, she laughs, which actually gives them the name of their firstborn son.

Isaac, which means he laughs. And Abraham's not exactly a spring chicken himself. He is as good as dad. So we get this miracle baby bought from a mom who is too old and a dad who is as good as dad.

And they believe. They don't believe without a few hiccups along the road. I mean, Hagar and Ishmael come in there somewhere. But they have a faith that looks forward to what God promises and a faith that looks upward to the God who promised it.

[20 : 05] Faith that would even see Abraham go to kill Isaac, even though he's the one from whom all this future promise would be given. And then all these people.

Isaac looking forward, bless Jacob and Esau. Jacob looking forward, blesses Joseph's son. And Joseph, who's the reason that everybody is now in Egypt, says we won't always be here.

Because God has promised that he'll set us free. Do you see that in all of this, what are the defining characteristics of this faith? Well, it is faith that looks onward.

And it is faith that looks upward. It is faith that believes who God is, trusts what God says, obeys what God says and trusts what God promises.

It's the same for Moses. You can look at it in his Exodus faith. He starts with godly parents. He's looking for a new world, an other world, a world beyond Egypt.

[21 : 09] He looks forward. Even counting disgrace for the sake of Christ of a greater worth than the treasures of Egypt. Because he was looking ahead to his reward.

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered because he saw him. He was invisible. It's explicit. Faith that looks onward.

Faith that looks upward. The people of Jericho walk around for seven days. Why? Because they trust on the seventh day God will do exactly what he says.

Even though it seems like the most ridiculous military strategy ever invented. We're going to destroy Edinburgh and we're going to walk around the bypass for seven days.

On the last day we'll do it seven times because we'll have built up some stamina. Let's see how that works out in our evangelism. These are future people. These are people continuously looking forward to what God promises to do.

[22 : 14] This is not nostalgia in Hebrews 11. The problem with nostalgia is it's never what you remember it used to be. And so we have this faith explicitly mentioned.

A faith that looks onward and a faith that looks upward. Let me read 32 to 40 for us. And then I want to pull out a few things that we need to do on the back of this.

32 to 40. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon. Gideon who looked forward and upward. Barak who looked forward and upward. Samson who looked onward and upward.

Jephthah who looked onward and upward. David who looked onward and upward. And Samuel who looked onward and upward. And the prophets who looked onward and upward. Who through faith conquered kingdoms and ministered justice.

And gained what was promised. Who shut the mouths of lions. Quenched the fire. The fury of the flames. And escaped the edge of the sword. Whose weakness was turned to strength. And who became powerful in battle.

[23 : 14] And routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead. Raised to life again. There were others who were tortured. Refusing to be released. So that they might gain an even better resurrection.

Some faced jizz and flogging. And even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawn in two. They were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins.

Destitute, persecuted and ill-treated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains. Living in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith.

Yet none of them received what had been promised. Since God had planned something better for us. So that only together with us would they be made perfect. Always looking forward.

All of these people always looking upward. So what are we to do? I have four things. We have to trust God. That he is sovereign. And he knows what he is doing.

[24 : 18] So that when he says go. We don't want ten bullet points. Why it is a good idea. We go. What is interesting about that verse. Is 32 to 38. Is some people are killed.

Some people are released. Some people conquer. Some people are exiled. Some people are powerful in battle. Others are tortured and imprisoned.

God shuts the mouths of lions. But he also lets some people be sawn in two. Some people administer justice. Others are ill-treated.

God is sovereign over it all. And we can trust him if we're those that are looking forward. And those that are looking upward. He knows us. He gets us.

He's sovereign over it all. So we can trust him no matter what it looks like. No matter what the outcome is. That idea of faith. Forsaking all. I trust him.

[25 : 17] Number one. We need to trust who God is. Number two. We need to obey what God says. This faith and obedience go together like love and marriage in Hebrews 11.

Whenever they believe something. They do something. Noah heard that God was going to destroy the world. And he needed to build an ark. The very next thing. He starts building an ark.

Everybody does something. Abraham's told to go. What's the next thing Abraham does? He goes. Sarah's told she's going to have a baby. She doesn't quite believe it.

But she goes to the antenatal class. Where I'm sure that everyone looked at her in utter bemusement. Are we listening?

It's been a big thing in Hebrews. Hebrews starts with a God who speaks. And our question is. Are we listening with a view to obey? We've got to trust who God is.

[26 : 23] And obey what God says. We've got to hope. The thing about Hebrews 11 is everyone's on a journey to somewhere on the back of what God has told them.

And what he has in view is that what they got was only a little shadow in the distance. But yet they still pursued it by faith. In Hebrews 11, the world to come is described as a reward.

A city with foundations whose architect is God. A better heavenly country. A city God has prepared. A place that makes the luxury of Pharaoh's court look like squalor.

A better resurrection. Something better for us. That we have got great hope. About what this faith will bring us in the end.

therefore let's set our minds upon that not on the things that we're just passing through from and then perspective that in view of all of that stuff is to give us perspective in this life is to give us perspective about our persecutions that there are any light and temporary and momentary trouble in the view of an eternity that we have to come but it also gives us perspective when it comes to our possessions because everyone in Hebrews 11 travels light Abraham has a tent Moses decides that the desert will be better to exhibit his faith in the luxuries of courts people walk around in sheepskins and goatskins destitute, persecuted and ill-treated they travel light this faith shapes everything about who they are what they have what they're looking for where they're going and it must do for us we all have too much stuff we're all just carrying too much weight that the things that we own are in danger of owning us and so this faith in Hebrews 11 is a real challenge to make sure we have things in the right perspective and I love this last bit these were all commended for their faith yet none of them received what had been promised since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect these people all acted on a word on a word from God and we're here acting on a living word sent from God for us this word is clearer this word is not a shadowy horizon it is the Lord Jesus who had flesh and blood who lived for us who died for us and who was raised to give us certainty he's the one who offered a better offering than Abel a better offering than Abel he was more obedient than Enoch he was not just the builder of the ark but he was the ark in which we can shelter from judgment he was the long expected ultimate miraculous child he didn't even own a tent he had nowhere to lay his head because he knew he was only passing through he was the sacrificed son not just the nearly sacrificed son he blessed everyone looking forward he led a better exodus than Moses he's the one who gets us ultimately through on dry land and he brings a greater victory through what seems like an even weaker plan than going around a city that we have a better promise a more certain promise a more visible and tangible promise and so Hebrews 11 encourages us to believe who God is because we know ultimately in the Lord Jesus to trust to obey what God says because it has been amplified through the life and death of Jesus and to trust what God promises because it's ours it's ours forever in Jesus let me pray

[31 : 03] Father God we want to be those of fearless faith faith that trusts you no matter what that obeys you no matter where you call Father who lives because we are those that have hope and Father those that live rightly in this world knowing that you oh God will deliver all that you promise us in your son Father we're so tempted to just stagnate so tempted to settle we're so tempted to just fit in with this world and all that it holds dear but Lord would you transform us by your word that we might trust Jesus we might pursue Jesus we might live for Jesus we might cling to Jesus that we might never turn back but from this moment on we would accelerate towards that glorious promise that is ours in Christ Jesus Father help us to have faith that looks onward and faith that looks upward onward to what Jesus has promised and upward to the one who is now seated at your right hand

Father do this for the glory of your name we pray Amen