

NEW SERIES: CHOOSE FAITH NOT FEAR
“What is Faith?”
Hebrews 11:1 – 6

Intro:

That's what many people of when they think of faith – a blind stepping off a cliff – a “leap” of faith. But it's not!

Now there are many peculiar ideas of what it is. It might help to show, first of all, what faith is not:

Faith, for instance, is **not positive thinking**; that is something quite different.

Faith is **not a hunch** that is followed.

Faith is **not hoping for the best**, hoping that everything will turn out all right.

Faith is **not a feeling of optimism**.

Faith is none of these things though all of them have been called faith. So what is faith?

1. Believing when I don't see it

Faith is visualizing the future in the present, it's seeing it in advance, it's being certain of what we do not see.

As human beings we often say things like, "I'll believe it when I see it." And God says, "No, you've got it all backwards. Some things you have to believe it, in order to see it." Whether you're an architect planning a building, or whether you're an artist creating a sculpture, or whether you're an Olympic athlete trying to break a world's record, or whether you're a scientist trying to send a man to the moon, you have to believe it before you can see it. All of those things require faith. You have to believe it's possible in advance, long before it will ever be possible. That's what the Bible says faith is -- believing when I don't see it.

Why Paul said, “We walk by faith, not by sight.”

Warner von Braun, the father of the space age, who built the atlas rocket and the saturn rockets that sent men to the moon, once said, "There has never been any significant achievement in human history that was not accompanied by faith." It all started out that somebody believed it was possible, believed it in advance. You have to believe it before it happens. Christopher Columbus believed the world was round before he saw it.

Faith turns dreams into reality. It is believing before I see it. But it's far more than that.

2. Obeying when I don't understand it

God gives us a couple exhibits. Exhibit A is a man named Noah. Just think of the doubts that Noah might have had. Can you imagine if God came to you one day and said, "I'm going to wipe out the whole world and start over with you." Would you have any doubts, by chance? Would you wonder what you ate last night and maybe this is just something ruminating in your stomach?

The Bible says in Hebrews 11:7 *"It was by faith that Noah built an ark to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God who warned him about something that had never happened before."* Circle "faith" and "obey" and draw a line between them.

Faith, the Bible says, is obeying when I don't understand it. It didn't make sense. He had all kinds of questions and doubts because it had never happened before. The Bible says that, before the flood, it had never rained. The earth was watered by a mist that came up from the ground like dew in the morning, condensation. It was a different kind of atmosphere. That may have been one of the reasons that people lived longer in those days -- of course they didn't have food additives then either. But the atmosphere evidently changed. It had never rained.

When God said, "Noah, I want you to build this big boat because it's going to flood." Noah said, "What's a flood?" God said, "It's when you get a lot of rain." And Noah said, "What's rain?" "Like when I take a lake and pour it down from the sky on you." Would you believe that, if you'd never seen it?

But Noah, because he had faith, obeyed even though it didn't make sense. God said, "I want you to build this boat here in the middle of the desert, not out at the ocean, and I'll bring the water to you." I'm so glad that Noah obeyed when it didn't make sense. I'm glad he obeyed when he didn't understand it.

Exhibit number two is a guy named Abraham. v. 8 *"It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country God has promised to him. He left his own country without knowing where he was going."* Here's Abraham, 75 years old and he lived in a place in modern day Iraq that is called Ur of the Chaldees. Just about the time he's ready to do social security, hang it up, retire, God says, "Oh, no. I don't want you to hang it up and retire. I want you to get it down, dust it off. You're getting ready to go on the adventure of your life at age 75. You're getting ready for social insecurity. I'm going to take you and turn you into the father of a brand new nation, so we're going to go to a new country."

I'm sure Abraham had all of his doubts and all kinds of questions. He said, "Where are we going?" God said, "You never heard of this place." Abraham said, "How long is it going to take to get there." God said, "Don't worry!" Abraham said, "How will I know when I'm there?" God said, "I'll tell you."

Would you do it? But because Abraham obeyed when he didn't understand it, he became the father of a nation called Israel. Many people were blessed because he obeyed even when it didn't make sense.

Faith always involves risking. Some people want a guarantee of success before they obey God. They read something in the Bible and God tells them to do something and they say, "Ok, God, once

You guarantee it's going to work, then I'll do it." God says, "That doesn't require any faith. I want you to believe when you don't see it and I want you to obey when you don't understand it."

In this book, the Bible, in the New Testament, there are 1,050 commands of God. He says, do this and this and your life will be blessed. Every time God tells you to do something, it's a test. It's a test of whom am I going to believe -- God or my gut. Am I going to do what God tells me is the right thing to do or am I going to do what I think is the right thing to do? Am I going to believe God knows best or am I going to believe that I know best? Of these 1,050 commands, many of them seem unreasonable, many of them seem unusual, inconvenient. Some of them seem flat out impossible to do. But they are all there for our benefit. Because God loves you and our heavenly Father knows best.

Do you remember when you were a kid and your parents would tell you to do something that made no sense at all to you as a kid? You thought, "What do my parents know! They're old fogies! They don't

know anything." Looking back, can you see the wisdom of what they were telling you to do and can you see that some of those things they told you to do, they were telling you out of love and for your own benefit?

God's wiser than your parents. When you ignore what He tells you to do, you're a fool. It's foolish. He is the creator. The Bible is the owner's manual for life. If I ignore it, who am I going to hurt? Not God. I'm just going to hurt me.

There's a lot of times it doesn't make sense. For instance, God says, When people hurt you and abuse you and misuse you, forgive them. Does that sound like the right thing to do? No. The natural thing is to get even. Retaliate. God says don't be resentful because resentment always hurts you more than somebody else. Just forgive them for your own sake so you can get on with your life. Because if you hold on to the hurt and bitterness you're only hurting yourself. It doesn't seem right, it may not even feel right but it is right because God says to do it.

Here's the point: If you learn to do whatever God tells you to do even when it seems absurd, then God can bless your life. You're going to build a life of faith and that's the foundation of building a great life.

On the other hand, if you ignore what God says to do -- "I don't believe that stuff. I'm going to do what I think is best. I'm my own god." you will miss out on all the great things and blessings that God has planned for your life and put you on this earth to enjoy. You'll miss them all.

I once asked my wife, "Can you think of a time when you obeyed God when He told you to do something and it didn't make sense?" She said, "Sure. When He told me to marry you." No, I'm just kidding!

Faith is believing when I don't see it, obeying when I don't understand it. And the Bible tells us also...

3. Giving when I don't have it

Giving and faith go together. God uses finances to test our faith. Have you ever had to decide between tithing and paying a bill. This is a test! God's saying, "Who are you going to trust? My promises to take care of you if you put Me first or yourself?"

In Hebrews 11, this Hall of Fame, the first guy who gets listed is a man named Abel. Abel gets listed not because he did something great. He didn't. He had no great accomplishment. No great achievement to his name. The only thing he did was he gave an offering. And God put him in the Hall of Fame. Why? It wasn't how much he gave, it wasn't what he gave. It was how he gave.

Hebrews 11:4 *"It was faith that made Abel's offering to God a better sacrifice than Cain's. Through his faith God approved of his giving."* Circle "faith", "offering", and "giving" and connect them all together because the Bible here is talking about giving in faith. He said it wasn't what he gave that pleased God but how he gave it.

It wasn't the amount, but the attitude. God doesn't care about the amount. He worries about the attitude by which you give.

You need to understand that there are two ways to give. You can give by faith or you can give by fear. You can give by reason or you can give by revelation. One of these ways you don't get any credit for. The other way pleases God.

First, I can give by reason. When I give by reason I look at my bank account and my check stubs and how much I've got and I figure out what can I afford. And I give a reasonable amount based on what I

can afford. That doesn't require any faith. An atheist can give by reason. You don't have to believe in God for that.

The other way to give is to give by revelation. Revelation is when you pray, and you ask God and you say, "God, what do You want me to give? God, how much do You want me to trust You for this time?" It's giving by faith that God blesses.

Giving is when you can't even afford it, when you give in advance -- like you're planting the seed in advance.

2 Corinthians 8:3 *"Because of their great joy, they gave even more than they could afford."* A very wealthy businessman told his pastor, "You tell the people that the best time to give is when their business is in the dumps, when they're in trouble. Because that's when you need God's help the most." Anybody can give when you've got excess funds flowing over, anybody can believe when it's sitting there in front of you, anybody can obey when you already see the results. It's when it doesn't feel like it and it doesn't make sense, that you're stepping out in faith. God says, "I want to bless your life but you have to trust Me first. So let's play a little game."

2 Corinthians 9:6 *"Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, but whoever sows generously will reap generously. v. 8 And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others."* God says, "You cannot out give Me."

Faith is giving when I don't have it. But it's even more than that.

4. Persisting when I don't feel like it

That's the opposite of our culture. Our culture says, "Do everything based on your feelings." If it feels good, do it. If it doesn't feel good, don't do it. Do whatever feels good. Live by your emotions. as a result, we end up being manipulated by our moods. Mature people live by their commitments, not their emotions. Emotions come and go.

What do you do when you're in a bad mood?" The answer is just keep on persisting! Keep doing the right thing, even when you don't feel like it.

I don't always feel like being nice to people. Do you? Sometimes I want to be selfish, grumpy, grouchy. And I want everybody to serve me. Sometimes I don't feel like serving my wife or thinking of her needs. Sometimes I don't feel like helping my kids Sometimes I don't feel like talking to you. This may shock you, but sometimes, even as a pastor, I don't feel like reading the Bible. Sometimes I don't feel like praying. I've discovered that when I don't feel like it, that's usually when I need to pray and read the Bible the most. In fact, I've discovered if the only time I pray and read the Bible is when I feel like it, the devil makes sure I never feel like it. So I have to keep on doing it, persisting in spite of how I feel. That is the secret of success. Successful people are simply ordinary people who do what the average person doesn't feel like doing. And that's why they're successful.

How do you get to be an Olympic or professional athlete? Hours and hours of exercising. Ask an Olympic athlete, "Do you always feel like working out six or eight hours a day?" Of course not. Ask a master musician, "Do you always feel like practicing hours a day to be an expert at your instrument?" Of course not. How does a super salesman become a super salesman? He or she continues to make the calls after everybody's gone home because they don't

feel like making any more calls and that's how he/she become so successful. The godly man or the godly woman becomes that way not by accident, but because they choose to do things and to develop habits that develop their spiritual life whether they feel like it or not.

Faith is being persistent. Faith is refusing to give up. Faith is doing the right thing, even when you're tired, even when you're moody.

How do you develop persistence? The Bible tells us in Hebrews 11:27 It gives us an example of a guy named Moses. *"It was by faith that Moses left Egypt and was not afraid of the King's anger. [He's talking about Pharaoh.] He held to his purpose like a man who could see the invisible."* You know the story of Moses. He led an entire nation that had been in slavery for four hundred years out across the wilderness, through the Red Sea, out on to the Sinai peninsula and they traveled around in circles for forty years, waiting for God to get the people ready to go into the Promised Land. A forty year wait is a long time to wait in a desert.

How do you be that persistent? The Bible tells us -- the last phrase. It says, *"He held to his purpose like a man who could see the invisible."* The key is, Keep your eyes on God. That's what Moses did. When you keep your eyes on God, it keeps you persistent.

Some of you today are at the quitting point. You feel like you're ready to give up on your marriage. Or you're ready to give up on your boyfriend. Or you're ready to give up on school,

because it just seems too hard. Or you're ready to give up on that career, or that dream, or that hope of ever getting married, -- or that hope of ever getting out of your marriage! -- or whatever. Some of you feel like your health situation is hopeless, "I'm never going to get any better." Some of you think your finances are hopeless, "I'm never going to get out of debt!" And you feel like giving up. And God brought you here this morning so He could say this to you, "Hang in there! Don't give up.

Keep believing when you don't see it, obeying when you don't understand it, giving, when you don't have it, and keep persisting when you don't feel like it." Keep your eyes on God. If you look at your problem you're going to be overwhelmed. **If you look at the world you'll be distressed, if you look within you'll be depressed, if you look at God, you'll be at rest. It's all in what you have your eyes on.**

There's two other things you need to know about faith.

5. Thanking God before I receive it

A good example of this is the story of Joshua. Hebrews 11:30 *"By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after the people had marched around them for seven days."* After Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt from Pharaoh, into the Promised Land, they went to take over the country and the capital was Jericho. It was the most fortified city in the world. There was no chance a bunch of ex-slaves were going to take it over. It was considered impenetrable. But the people of God marched around the city parameter -- the walls of it -- for seven days. First in silence, then later thanking God in praise. The whole time they were thanking God in advance that God had already delivered the city in to their hands. On the seventh day, after thanking God in advance in faith, the walls came tumbling down.

That's what the Bible says faith is. Faith is not believing God can do something. Because God can do it whether you believe it or not.

His ability is not dependent upon your thinking He can do it. Faith is not believing God can do something. And faith is not believing God will do something. That's hope. You hope He will.

Faith is believing God is doing something right now, even though I don't see it, that He's working behind the scenes, that the answer is already on its way, that He's moving the pieces into place even as we speak. It's thanking God in advance.

Mark 11:24 *"When you pray and ask for something, believe that you have received it [past tense] and you will be given what you ask for [present tense]."* Believe you'll receive it and then you'll get it. Am I saying I have to believe I've got it in order to get it? Yes. That's called faith. Faith is thanking God in advance. If I were to say to you, "Come up after the service. I've got a gift for you." And I give you a check for \$5000, would you wait until after you cashed it to thank me? No. You'd thank me right on the spot. You haven't cashed it yet. The money's not in your hands, but you'd thank me in advance because you knew you could count on it. My checks are good. And so are God's by the way! So it's thanking God in advance.

If you wait until after a prayer has been answered to thank God for it, is that faith? No, that's gratitude. Gratitude is saying, "Thank You, God, for what You did." Faith is thanking God in advance of what He did.

When you pray, how do you pray? You ask Him, "God, here's what I need" and then you go back and keep on begging, "I need it! I need it. Hello! Anybody home! God?" Like you're trying to wear God down. "Please, pretty please with sugar on it..." And finally God says, "OK!" And He gives it to you. Is that the way God is? No.

God is a loving Father that you don't wear down by nagging until He finally gives in. But the Bible does say be persistent in prayer. So what do you do? You ask Him once and then you keep on thanking Him. Say, "God, this is what I need. You know I need this in my life. It's a legitimate honest need." Then the next time you pray you say, "God, I thank You that the answer is on its way. I haven't seen it yet, but I thank You that the answer's on its way. God, I thank You in advance." And you keep on thanking, keep on thanking, keep on praising, keep on thanking. And in God's timing, the answer comes.

I'm saying faith is thanking God in advance, believing the answer's already happened. You're just waiting to see it. That means that if God tells you to go after Moby Dick in a row boat, you take along the tartar sauce.

6. Trusting even if I don't get it

Some people try to make God like a vending machine that God automatically will give you anything you want, but that's not true. God is not a vending machine. Vending machines will give you things that you don't need. Vending machines will give you things that will kill you. God will never give you something that's bad for you. Does a parent give a child everything the child asks for? Of course not. Not if the parent is sensible and loving. And God's not going to give you everything you ask for. He said, "I will meet all your needs". He doesn't say, "I'll meet all your greeds." Big difference.

So God is not some kind of vending machine where you put in a prayer and you automatically get everything you want. Some people today teach the idea that if you have enough faith you'll always be well, you'll never have any problems, you'll never be sick, everything will be going great. Baloney! It's not in the Bible. The Bible doesn't teach that. God's more interested in your character than He is in your comfort. God's more interested in making you holy than He is in making you happy. He knows holiness is the way to genuine happiness. So God's not going to give you just whatever you ask for.

The Bible says that faith is trusting if I don't get it. Here's the truth: God hears and answers every prayer you pray. Fact number two, He doesn't answer always the way you want Him to. In fact, sometimes when you pray, God says, Yes. And sometimes when you pray, God says, No. And sometimes when you pray, God says, Not yet. And sometimes God says, "I've got a better idea. I've got something different. I know you're going to like this better." All four of those are equally valid answers to prayer. And faith is trusting God even when I don't get the answer I expected or wanted.

Notice this verse talking about some of the other Hall of Fame-ers in God's Hall of Fame. *"These were all commended for their faith yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better."* Living by faith does not exempt you from problems. Just ask the Christians in Bosnia right now. Sometimes we pray for God to remove a problem and instead He keeps the problem there and gives you the strength to go through it. And you end up being stronger. If He took all the problems out of your way, you'd be a brat! Spoiled! You'd be weak. But God wants you to have character and strength and maturity so He lets you go through some problems instead of removing them and He gives you the ability to handle it.

Anybody can trust God when things are going great. Anybody can give when they've got extra money. Anybody could persist when they see the deadline is only a couple inches away. Anybody can believe when it's right there in front of them. But real faith is built in the valleys of life. Sometimes it's trusting God when I don't get it.

Which of these aspects do you need to work on? How much faith do you have? How do you rate your faith? If you're going to be pleasing to God, you need to work on these. Which one do you need to work on?

Do you need to work on believing when you don't see it? Do you need to work on obeying when you don't understand it?

Do you need to work on giving when you don't have it? Or persisting when you don't feel like it? Some of you may need to work on thanking before you receive it. And you may need to work on trusting if you don't get it. That's what it's all about.

Some of you say, "I'd really like to grow in faith. I'd like to build my faith." Hang around here during the coming weeks as we talk about it. How to grow in faith, what the shield of faith is for and so on.

How does God build your faith? Let's wrap it up with these two things. There are two ways God builds your faith.

First, through His word, through the Bible. The Bible says in Romans 10:17 *"Faith comes from hearing the word of God."* So the more you get into this book, the more you're going to grow in faith. If you don't ever read the Bible, you're not going to grow much faith. This is the spiritual food that builds the muscle.

The **other way that God builds your faith is through trials and testings**. 1 Peter 1:7 *"These trials are only to test your faith and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. It will bring you much praise and honor on the day of His return."* God will use difficulties to test your faith. God will use demands on your time to test your faith. God will use dollars, financial, giving to test your faith. God will use delays to test your faith. Some of you are going through a tough time right now and you're about ready to give up. I want to say to you, Hang on! God will make a way if you will trust Him. If you will work on these six areas of faith in your life God will make a way and bring you through this time.

Third, God builds your faith through **fulfilled promises and answers to prayer.**

Last, God builds your faith by **using my experience to help others** – 2 Cor. 1:3,4