

## **THE BENEFITS OF LIVING FAITH (Hebrews 11:1-3)**

One of my favorite commercials features a smiling husband and father. He looks into the camera and introduces himself: “I’m Stanley Johnson. I’ve got a great family. I’ve got a four-bedroom house in a great community.” After showing brief clips of his family and large home, you see him driving an SUV as he says, “Like my car? It’s new.” Then, you see him at an exclusive golf course and he says, “I even belong to the local golf club.” Next, you see him cleaning his swimming pool. Still smiling, he asks, “How do I do it?” Next, we see him standing at his outside grill preparing a barbeque dinner for his family, and he answers his question. He says, “I’m in debt up to my eyeballs. I can barely pay my finance charges.” The ever-present smile looks a little less sincere as he pleads, “Somebody, help me.”

The ironic thing is what the commercial is advertising. It’s, of all things, for a loan company. Their message is not, “Quit borrowing money.” Their message is, “Borrow more money from us.”

Years ago, I remember seeing a commercial for a certain credit card company. The tagline of the commercial boasted, “Membership has its privileges.” Of course, the commercial was appealing to the vanity and pride of potential customers. The goal for those individuals is that they would think, “If I just own this piece of plastic, I am going to have privileges.”

People in our world, particularly those in our affluent culture, want privileges, advantages, benefits. Benefits are not a bad thing, but is a word that is often used. Your insurance company offers you certain benefits. You want to work for a company that pays benefits. We see advertisements, every day, for vitamins, and supplements, and diets that hail the benefits of their particular product or plan.

This morning, as we work through today’s text, I want to present to you three benefits from just one thing that is highlighted in our passage. Our text is just three verses long. It is Hebrews 11:1-3. Verse 1 presents Benefit #1. Verse 2 contains Benefit #2. Verse contains Benefit #3.

Hebrews 11 is a continuation of what was mentioned toward the end of the previous chapter. Look at 10:38. The author of Hebrews draws from Habakkuk 2:4 just as Paul did in Romans 1 and again in Galatians 3. “The just shall live by faith,” could be considered the theme of NT Christianity.

One man pointed out that Romans focuses on the first part of that statement—*the just*. He shows us what it takes to be justified. Galatians deals with the shall live part. He presents to us the life of faith. Hebrews is concerned with the last portion of the verse—*by faith*. He is focused on helping us see what it means to live by faith.

We are going to learn three benefits that become ours when we live by faith. I want you to notice that there is a significant difference between having faith and living by faith. We often tell people, “You just need to have faith.” That is not the message here. Faith is not a product that we acquire and hold on to as if the mere possession of faith will solve all our problems.

The text does not say, “The just shall have faith.” No. It says, “The one who is righteous shall live by faith.” We are to live our lives by faith. If we will do that, today’s text assures us of three benefits that will be ours.

### **Benefit #1: When We Live by Faith, God Gives Us Certainty.**

Look again at v. 1. Essentially, the text is telling us that we can be certain of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see with our physical eyes.

I like how the devotional writer J. Oswald Sanders put it. He wrote, “Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.”

Before we examine what faith is, let’s take a moment to consider what biblical faith is not. Faith is not a feeling. Faith is not mere optimism. It is not wishful thinking or positive thinking. Faith is not a hunch. Many people have faith in faith. That is silliness. We don’t place our faith in faith. We place our faith in who God is and what He has said.

Since God—His character and His word—is the object of our faith, there are things of which we can be certain. I appreciate what Kent Hughes wrote: “Faith’s character is, in a word, *certitude*.”

I like that word—*certitude*. There are two things we need to live the Christian life well. We need certitude, and we need fortitude. Both come from living life by faith in the character of God and the word of God, who He is and what He’s said.

It is my observation that many, many people in our world today are living life without certainty. Instead, they are weary from battling with doubt and fear. They question whether or not they have what it takes. They are fearful that they aren’t parenting well. As a result, they are wondering whether their kids are going to turn out okay.

They second guess their decisions about this or that. Did I choose the right career? Is this where I am supposed to be. Am I missing out on what God wants for me and from me?

God doesn’t want you to be wracked by self-doubt. You can live life with a boldness and a firm resolve that you are doing what God wants you to do and that you are headed in the direction of His choosing.

Verse one deals with two things: the future and the invisible, what is to come and what cannot be seen. There is a sense in which the person of faith has the ability to know the future and see the unseen. That does not mean the person of faith is some kind of fortune-teller who knows the future. It is not that the person of faith knows that the future holds. What he knows is the One who holds the future.

He knows the Jesus is coming back. He knows that every believer in Christ will receive a resurrection body when Jesus does return. He knows that what we lost in Eden will be restored.

Also, the person of faith can see with his eyes of faith what goes unseen with our physical eyes. I have never seen God with my physical eyes, but I see Him with the eyes of faith. I have never seen angels, but I perceive their presence. I have never seen heaven, but as A.W. Tozer wrote, “It is as real to me as any earthly thing.”

I grew up listening to Walter Cronkite give the news every week night on the CBS

Evening News. Cronkite actually gave the news. He didn't give his viewers commentary. He didn't spin the news to fit his agenda. He did not engage in partisan rhetoric. He just gave the news. At the conclusion of each broadcast, he would say, "And that's the way it is," and then he would state the date. On the evening of his last broadcast as the CBS anchor, he said, "And that's the way it is, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1981."

The man or woman of faith is able to say with assurance, "And that's the way it is." They can also say, "And that's the way it's going to be."

## **Benefit #2: When We Live by Faith, God Gives Us His Approval.**

Let's read v. 2 again. *Commendation* is the word the ESV uses. *Approval* shows up in some of the other translations. N.T. Wright offers this: "It [faith] is what the men and women of old were famous for."

Are you famous for your faith? Would anybody have occasion to say of you, "Now, there goes a person who really trusts God. There is no doubt that he or she lives life by faith"?

I am convinced that faith should be viewed as a verb rather than a noun, but when we talk about *having faith*, we are obviously using *faith* as a noun. To say, "You just need to have faith" makes faith into a commodity, a product, something you can possess and put into storage to be retrieved when needed.

The NT writers don't use the word *faith* in that way. For them, faith is action. Faith shows itself by what it does. Once we get to v. 4 of this chapter, the author begins to chronicle various people from the OT, and he tells us what they did by faith. It is worth noting that since v. 3 references God's creative activity which is found in Genesis, the first seven people the author mentions all show up in Genesis.

In his commentary, Warren Wiersbe summarizes Hebrews 11 by pointing out:

- Abel worshiped by faith.
- Enoch walked by faith.
- Noah worked by faith.
- The patriarchs waited in faith.
- Moses warred by faith.
- Joshua and Rahab won by faith.

Then, in vv. 32-40, we find various heroes each of whom distinguished themselves by what their faith led them to do. While v. 1 dealt with the certainty of faith, the rest of the chapter is all about the activity of faith. It is this activity of faith that wins God's approval.

It occurs to me that we spend a great deal of our lives seeking the approval of others. Naturally, children want their parents' approval. A little boy will say, "Mommy, Mommy, watch me do this." Then, he does something that he is certain will be impressive. It occurs to me, however, that it is not just young children who long for their parent's approval. An adult child in his 40's or even 50's may still want their mom or dad

to say, “I’m proud of you, son” or “You are a good daughter; I’m glad you are mine.” For some of you, that approval never came, and it has left a hole in your heart.

A student wants to impress his teacher. He or she works hard on that assignment or that paper. The student is so happy when the teacher draws a smiley face at the top of the paper when grading it. Even as a college student, I would read the professor’s comments in the margins of my paper looking for words of affirmation.

The employee wants to please the boss. The athlete longs for the accolades of the coach. The performer wants the applause of the crowd or desires that the critic would write a favorable review.

Keep in mind that there is no greater one to please than the Creator. It has been said, “If you please God, it doesn’t matter who you displease, and if you displease God it doesn’t matter who you do please.”

I was ordained as a pastor in August of 1987, almost 35 years ago. Dr. C. Mack Roark, a Vice President at OBU was the one I asked to preach my ordination message. He came and spoke from the opening verses of 1 Peter 5 which counsels pastors how to shepherd their flock. In the closing words of his message, he quoted from Jesus’ parable of the talents in which the master says, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . Enter in to the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23). He encouraged me to serve in such a way that one day God would say to me, “Well done thou good and faithful servant.” He asked, “What more could you want?”

There is nothing greater than knowing we have pleased God. And a few verses after our text, we are told that there is one indispensable ingredient that has to be present for God to be pleased. Look at v. 6.

We cannot please God apart from faith, period. God is not pleased by our skill. He is not pleased by our ingenuity. Our dogged perseverance alone does not please God. It is our faith and reliance upon Him that wins His smile of approval.

What are you doing that requires faith? In other words, what are you attempting to achieve that will utterly fail unless He shows up, and you believe that He will?

We come to the third and final benefit.

### **Benefit #3: When We Live by Faith, God Gives Us Understanding.**

Look at v. 3. Those who understand God best are those who trust Him most. We don’t have to know how God does something to understand that it was He who did it. A case in point that the author of Hebrews brings up is the creation. We don’t have to be able to explain how God accomplished the work of creation to understand that He did it.

This past week, NASA published photos taken by the new telescope called the James Webb Space Telescope. It is situated a million miles from earth and has just begun taking pictures of the universe. The first photograph to be published was stunning. Scientists say if you held a grain of sand at arms’ length, that illustrates the point in space that the telescope focused on to take its first photo. Yet, that one slim point in space revealed thousands of galaxies. Our universe is chock full of galaxies.

We live in the Milky Way Galaxy. It is said that if you could travel at the speed of

light, it would take you 100,000 years traveling at 186,000 per second to travel the diameter of our Milky Way Galaxy. And that is just one of billions upon billions of galaxies in our universe each of which is populated by billions and billions of stars.

I don't have to understand how galaxies are formed to understand that God did it. Faith takes God at His word, and the first sentence of this Book proclaims, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Verse 3 is one example of an overarching principle. The principle was stated by Augustine in the early part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. He said that faith is the beginning point for understanding. Six-hundred years later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Saint Anselm picked up on and expanded what Augustine taught. He wrote, "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand."

The point is that understanding follows faith. It doesn't precede it.

Even when we don't understand how, we can still understand that something is so because of God's power and wisdom.

I don't fully understand how the incarnation happened or exactly how Jesus can be 100% man while still being 100% God; yet, I understand that to be the case.

I am not able to explain how God is simultaneously three Person while still being of one essence. The trinity remains a mystery to me, but I understand that God is both three and one.

I can't solve the dilemma of God being completely sovereign in the salvation of the lost while at the same time each person is responsible for his or her salvation. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility seem to be at odds; yet, the Bible teaches both and so, I believe both.

It is faith that enables us to understand that something is so even if we can't fully explain how it is so.

I close with a story about a group of mice who lived inside a large, grand piano. The mice enjoyed their piano world. Often, without warning, wonderful music would fill their world. The beautiful sounds would reach back and fill every dark corner of their home.

The mice were impressed by what they heard, and they took comfort from the thought that although he was invisible to them, there was a Great Pianist who produced those heart-warming sounds.

In time, a daring mouse climbed up and investigated more of their piano world. He discovered there were strings. He found that there were wires of different lengths, and as those wires vibrated, they made sound.

This new data led to a revision of old beliefs. Only the most conservative of the mice still believed in the existence of an unseen Piano Player.

Not long afterward, another mouse explorer discovered there were a great number of hammers that hit the wires, and the sound was produced when the hammers danced on the wires. This new information led still more to reject the notion of a Piano Player. It was obvious to most that was just a myth. Now, there was a rational explanation for what produced the music.

While the word around us becomes more and more naturalistic in their explanations for what we see around us, we who live by faith understand there is a good, great, and

glorious God who stands behind the natural world.

What do you need today? Do you need certainty? Do you seek God's approval? Are you looking for understanding? Whatever it might be, the key is to live by faith. Honor Him for who He is. Lock on to what He says. Don't settle for having faith. Do your faith, and God will provide you with what you need.