

What's So Great about Faith?

Rich Nathan
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Never Give Up
Hebrews 11:1-6

If the Bible is about anything, it's about faith. In fact, the word "faith" appears 270 times in the New International Version of the Bible. The word "believe" appears 160 times. So, you have something on the order of 400+ times the Bible speaks about faith. In Hebrews 11 alone, 18 times in one chapter, the author uses the phrase

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By faith

There are lots of attacks on the notion of faith these days.

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Faith's enemies

People who call themselves New Atheists say the problem with the world, in fact, the problem throughout history is all these crazy, irrational people who have religious faith.

A few years ago there were buses that drove around London with big signs that said,

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Photo of double-decker bus

"There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

Now, on the one hand, people have argued about whether there is or isn't a God for thousands of years. I happen to believe that God really does exist outside of my brain. That there really is a God. I think I have good reasons for believing why there's a God. But, what's really remarkable about this atheist bus is the notion that what's keeping you from enjoying your life right now is the fact that you believe there is a God. If you just became an atheist and put your religious beliefs aside, you wouldn't worry anymore and your life would be one of constant enjoyment. You wouldn't be subject to the normal ups and downs of human emotions – being bored, being irritated, feeling anxious, getting depressed or angry or jealous. All of those things would be out of your life because there probably is no God so stop worrying and enjoy your life.

It reminds me of John Lennon's song "Imagine". Isn't the melody incredible? There's John singing,

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Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace

So, if you just got rid of religion, people would live lives of peace. Because the natural state of humanity is peace. The natural state of humanity is not tribal. It's not competition or conflict. It's not dog-eat-dog. It's not one person or one group trying to dominate the other. It's peace. And not just peace between people, but the natural state of folks if they have no religion is inner peace. Because, as you know, life without God is really easy. It's easy to live with a parent or a spouse who has dementia. It's religion that's robbing your peace. But if your child has an addiction or you've got a kid with severe disabilities, religion just complicates things. It's religion that keeps you from having peace when you're dying or when you're going through a divorce.

Getting rid of faith will not necessarily cause people to enjoy life. Getting rid of faith won't guarantee that we'll live lives of peace. In radical contrast to the atheists and John Lennon, the Bible speaks about the value of faith hundreds of times. What makes faith so great? That's what I'm going to talk about today. But first let's pray.

Slide Hebrews 11:1-6

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

² This is what the ancients were commended for.

³ 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.

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 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.

What is faith? Faith is a huge concept in the Bible. We could think of it as being like a diamond with different facets

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Faith's facets

Before I look at what faith is, let me tell you what faith is not.

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What faith is not

Biblical faith – the kind of faith that is commended here in Hebrews 11 – is not just checking a box next to certain doctrinal statements. Do you believe that God is a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Check. Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins on the cross? Check. Do you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead? Check.

Biblical faith is certainly not less than assent to certain truths. But biblical faith is so much more than “have you checked the box?” I think there are so many churchgoers who have simply checked the box. Do you think there’s a God? Check. Simply checking the box won’t change your life. Simply “checking the box” won’t change your marriage. And simply “checking the box” won’t change the world.

The Apostle James had some really hard things to say about faith that is simply intellectual assent to a set of propositions. Here’s what we read:

Slide James 2:19

¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

In other words, even demons assent to the existence of one God, but they don’t follow that one God. They don’t love that one God. They don’t trust that one God. Demons don’t repent. Demons don’t love people. James is comparing some of his churchgoing readers with demons. Both groups do not have biblical faith. What is biblical faith?

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What faith is

One word that you could use as a helpful substitute for the word faith is the word trust.

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Faith is trust

Biblical faith is trust. Biblical faith asks the question, “do you trust God?”

Let me drill in a little bit on this question. It’s a very personal one. Do you trust God? To me, trust involves both the head and the heart. At the head level, do I trust that God is competent? That he’s good at what he does at being God? That he knows what he’s doing, he’s reliable. When I trust someone at work with my head, I say “this person is competent”. If I give them this project, I know that they will follow through. I don’t have to check up on them. I know they’ll do a good job. And when I trust God, I’m

saying I know he will do a good job in running the world and caring for me and my loved ones. I don't always have to check up on him.

But Biblical faith is more than just trusting with the head, it's also trusting with the heart. When I trust God with my heart that means that I'm able to be completely transparent with God. I can open up with God the way I would open up with my best friend or spouse. That would be someone who, for me, is a safe person. When I trust God with my heart, I am able to trust him with my secrets, with my fears, with my worries, with things that no one else knows about me – including things I'm ashamed of. To trust God with my heart is for me to be real with God, to not put on a mask and not play pretend.

One facet of faith in the Bible is that you trust God. Let me get personal with you. Do you trust God with the stuff you're going through right now? If you're married, do you trust God with your marriage? Do you trust God with your work or with your relationships or your finances? When you pray, do you say to yourself, God is really good at being God? He's really competent at running the universe and taking care of me. God knows what he's doing. I know he's going to do a good job being all that God claims to be. He's my Father in Heaven, my Savior, my protector, my healer, my redeemer, my counselor, my friend.

Do you trust God with your head and do you trust him with your heart? If so, you'll often find yourself really opening up to God, letting God into every part of your soul and every room of your house, telling God what you would tell no one else.

Another facet of faith in the Bible is restful reliance upon God.

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Faith is restful reliance upon God

What I mean by that is when I'm in a tough situation, faith says I'm just going to put my full weight on God. I'm going to rely on him as opposed to relying just on myself. I'm going to rest on what God knows, not just what I know.

When I was planning to marry Marlene, there were so many things about Marlene that I loved. I loved the way that she loved God. I loved the way she loved me. I loved her honesty. I loved the fact that she was absolutely without any pretense or needing to always look good. I loved her heart for justice. I loved her truthfulness. I loved the fact that she was gorgeous. She was emotionally healthy. She was a hard worker. She was smart. We had great conversations. There were a hundred things on my checklist that I was able to check. And lots of people who I respected thought we'd be a great match (which parenthetically I would advise any of you who are thinking about getting

married. Ask the opinions of older people you really respect. Do you think this is a really good match for me? Then listen!)

But as I looked forward to being married, I thought “My gosh, I’m signing up to love and live with another person for the next 70 years. How do I know that this is going to work?” I couldn’t rely on myself. I couldn’t rest peacefully on my knowledge of Marlene or myself or the future. My faith to be able to marry Marlene was based on this thought to myself, “If Marlene continues to pursue Jesus and that’s where she’s been, and I continue to pursue Jesus because that’s where I’ve been, and we both believe this is how God is leading us and all of our older friends and our pastors are saying “Yes, we believe that God is in this” then I can rest on the Lord!” I can put my life and my future in the hands of God.

The Old Testament has so many different ways to express what faith is. It certainly includes trusting in God, resting upon God, but it also involves cleaving to God, clinging to God. Wrapping your life around God. Waiting on God. Hoping in God. Taking refuge in the Lord.

I need to clarify something about faith. So many people today say it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere. They say the key is faith. Whatever you believe, whatever your higher power is, what’s so great about faith is just having faith. You can place your faith in anything. You can place your faith in the goodness of people or a choice to just believe things will work out in the end or you could put your faith in your family or in your kids or in your own resilience, your own stick-to-itiveness. I just know the way I am and I believe I will succeed because that’s the kind of person I am. Or you can put your faith in aliens or romance or whatever. It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere.

But that’s not what the Bible means by faith. Biblical faith is not just a matter of having faith. Biblical faith considers the object of your faith. Christians aren’t people who just place our faith in faith. We place our faith in God. Faith is a channel. Faith is an instrument. Faith is a way to receive God’s gift. Faith doesn’t save us. God saves us. God does all the work. Faith simply receives what God has done. Faith trusts in Jesus. It’s not faith that saves us, it’s the object of our faith – God – working in and through Jesus Christ.

When I hear people say, “Oh, I wish I had your faith,” I realize the person doesn’t understand faith at all. Because faith doesn’t talk about itself. What faith boasts in is the object of faith, namely God.

At the end of the day what Christians want people to say is not what a great faith we have, but what a great God we have. Don’t look at your faith – how strong it is, or how

weak it is. Fix your eyes on God's faithfulness. What makes faith great is we place our faith in the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

And just as a thought for those of you who feel like you don't believe nearly as strongly as someone else. You struggle with faith, you have doubts, you have questions, you don't seem to be as full of certainty as other people in the church or other family members of yours. Listen to me now! Faith is not an all or nothing proposition – either you've got it or you don't. It's not like a light switch – either it's on or off. Either you're completely certain about something or you have no faith at all.

Jesus tells us that even a little bit of faith can go a long way. I think about the man who came to Jesus asking Jesus to heal his son. Jesus said to him,

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"Everything is possible for the person who believes."

The man responded the way that most of us need to respond to Jesus most of the time,

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"I believe. Help my unbelief."

For most of us, most of the time, our faith is like a picket fence that separates your house from your neighbor's. If you look at the picket fence, is the fence there or not? Well, it's there. There are definitely boards there. But a lot of the fence is just air. Every once in a while, something shattering happens in our lives. We experience a deep disappointment, an unanswered prayer, a question that we can't answer. And life pulls a few boards out of the fence. But the fence is still there. Every once in a while, we have a dramatic experience of God. We see a miracle. God does something amazing in response to our prayers. It's unmistakable and it's like a few boards are nailed back up on this picket fence. The fence was already there, but Christian maturity – maturing in faith – is adding boards to the fence.

So, what is faith? I've talked about facets of faith. Now, let's look at a definition of faith.

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Faith's definition

Slide Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

The author of Hebrews is not giving us an exhaustive definition. That's why I started with the idea that faith has so many different facets in the Bible. But here is a definition

of faith that we shouldn't miss. Faith is about the future we hope for and the invisible, what we do not see. What the author of Hebrews is giving us is a kingdom perspective of faith. This verse literally could read,

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"Faith is the substance of things hoped for."

The Greek word that's translated "confidence" in the NIV is *hupostasis*. Faith gives substance to things hoped for.

Here is a kingdom perspective of faith. Faith reaches into the unseen future, a future that is invisible to the naked eye kingdom of God and gives the kingdom of God substance, in our present moment. What's the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is what the world will be like when God completely runs the show. The kingdom of God is what the universe will be like when there is nothing and no one who is ever saying "no" to God.

When the kingdom of God fully comes, no child will ever die again. There will be no more heart disease or heartbreak; no more dementia or diabetes or depression or death; no more murders, or kids in jail, or funerals, or wars; no more mental illness, or suicide or addiction. All the things that oppress this world now, all the things that tear life down now, they'll all be removed.

What does faith do? The writer of Hebrews says "Faith grabs hold of the future kingdom that's coming when Jesus the Messiah returns." Faith gives substance to that future kingdom and makes it real now. By faith we bring God's kingdom of justice into this world now as we work for justice. By faith we grab hold of God's future kingdom of healing into the world as we pray for the sick. By faith, we grab hold of God's future kingdom of forgiveness and we make it real now. Faith is the instrument through which God's invisible kingdom materializes in the present.

The author goes on and composes this beautiful hymn to faith. He wants to lift up our minds and increase our desire to have a stronger faith. He speaks to us in the rest of Hebrews 11 about the greatness of faith.

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Faith's greatness

The way the author speaks to us about the greatness of faith is that he tells us what faith enables us to do. What's the function of faith? Atheists say faith robs you of the enjoyment of life. If you got rid of this thing called faith, we'd all be living in peace.

But the author of Hebrews says, “Let me tell you why you want faith in your tool belt, why you don’t want to go through life without faith in God. Here’s what faith enables us to do.”

Slide Hebrews 11:3

³ 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.

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Faith enables us to believe for something out of nothing

Biblical faith is so different than the faith of most of the other world religions. In biblical faith, God creates out of nothing. In the Ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world and in many religions today, God created the universe out of pre-existing matter. God or the gods started with something and then reshaped it to fit his purposes. But in scripture, we have God starting with nothing and making something. Which, by the way, is what 21st century science teaches. The consensus is the universe began out of nothing, the Big Bang.

What does any of that mean for our Christian faith? Think about this with me. Faith says that God is in the business of making something out of nothing. So, regarding our own salvation, it’s not like God looks in people’s hearts and says “You’ve got something in you that I can work with. You’ve got a little bit of integrity. You’ve got some decent qualities. You’ve got this wonderful stick-to-itiveness or resilience or street smarts or social skills or kindness or whatever. If I just breathe on that, I could blow on the little spark that’s in you and make it into a great fire.

That’s not the biblical view of salvation. The biblical view of Christian salvation is that God starts with absolutely nothing in us. The Bible says that apart from Jesus, we were dead in our sins and trespasses. God takes something that is completely dead and makes it alive. It’s not like we were a little sick. We were in the hospital and needed a blood transfusion or even that we were in the ICU. No, we were in the coroner’s office in a body bag when Jesus found us.

The Bible says that before Jesus came into our lives, we were blind. We weren’t just nearsighted and Jesus comes along to give us stronger glasses so we can see. We were blind. What God does in saving a person is he starts with nothing. And he makes us into something. He starts with a sinner and he makes us a saint. He starts with a dead person and he makes us alive. He starts with an enemy and he makes us a friend. God doesn’t need something to build on from your family history. You say, “I come from the worst kind of family. No one in my family was ever a follower of Jesus. My parents were divorced. Dad abandoned us. Mom was an alcoholic. Grandpa was an adulterer. My sister is an addict.” Biblical faith enables a person to believe that I may

have come from nothing, but God will make me into something. It's not my power or my popularity or my positive thinking. It's not my grades or my grit or my group. Faith says that the only thing that matters is God who can bring something out of nothing.

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Faith enables us to make better sacrifices

Slide Hebrews 11:4

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

There's nothing in this text that tells us why Abel's sacrifice was accepted and Cain's wasn't, other than Abel's faith. People have speculated about what made Abel's sacrifice so acceptable going back to the time before Jesus – it was a blood sacrifice, it was offered in accordance with Jewish rituals or Abel gave his best – the writer doesn't say any of those things. He says the only difference between Cain and Abel's offering was that Abel's sacrifice was offered in faith.

We just completed a giving campaign here at Vineyard Columbus that we called "The Story Continues". And, many of you, when you wrote your pledge and turned it in, it was an act of faith to be stretched. You said, "God, I'm just trying to respond to what you're telling me. You need to provide. I'm relying on you. I'm responding to what you're saying to me." Let me encourage you to continue to walk in faith to fulfill your pledge and to continue to stretch as you keep your commitment. Whenever you give to God, to promote God's Kingdom, what makes your giving acceptable is what God sees your heart. As God looks in your heart, does he see faith? Does he see you stretching? Does he see you acting out of what you say you believe? Does God see in your giving and your sacrifices a willingness to live consistently to what you say are your convictions about Jesus really are.

Does God see in your sacrifice and your giving, the grateful heart of Abel? That's what faith enables us to do. Faith enables us to say to God, "You have been so good to me. What I give is just a way to say thank you. Thank you, Jesus."

And finally,

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Faith enables us to walk with God throughout our lives

Slide Hebrews 11:5

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

Concerning Enoch, here’s what we read way back in Genesis:

Slide Genesis 5:22, 24

²² After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. ²⁴ Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.

Faith is a lifelong journey. It’s a walk – left foot, right foot, left foot. Faith is not just something we go in for when we choose as an initial matter to trust Jesus for our salvation. We don’t just start the Christian life with faith. No one can come to God unless they entrust themselves to God and rely on God’s provision and forgiveness and acceptance, purchased by the blood of Jesus at the cross. But faith is not just something you go in for at the beginning of the Christian life or when you’re young. Faith is needed at every stage of life.

See, there’s never a time in life when we don’t need faith. If you’re in high school, you need faith to acknowledge before your friends that you’re a follower of Jesus, to stand up to peer pressure, to be willing to go in a direction different than all the kids in your high school. If you’re in your 20’s or 30’s, you need faith as you try to figure out what God’s purpose is for your life. You need faith to figure out who, if anybody, you should marry. Where should I work? Where should I live? What long-term commitments should I make? It takes faith to surrender yourself to God’s purpose for your life and God’s will. It takes faith to raise kids in a world that’s so hostile to kids and teens. It takes faith to hang in there with your marriage when things are going south.

I’m 63. I’ve been walking with God for 45 years. I need faith in this season of life as I’m transitioning from my role as senior pastor. I need faith to enter this new season of life. For those of you who are widows and widowers or you’re facing old age or health concerns, there’s never a time of life that God doesn’t say to us, “What I’m looking for right now from you is faith.”

I’d like to close with these words. Apologies to John Lennon.

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Imagine there’s a heaven
It’s easy if you try
A God who loves us
A place where no one cries
Imagine all the people

Trusting God today
You may say I'm a Christian
That I've felt God's loving grace
Come join me on faith's journey
And you'll see him face to face.

What's So Great about Faith?

Rich Nathan
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Never Give Up
Hebrews 11:1-7

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