

Hebrews 11:1-7

Christian faith is "reasonable trust" and it changes everything.

"I wish I had your faith – but I am a man of reason"

I have been hearing that sentiment almost all of my life. I remember as a teenager in the late 1970s listening to a much loved biology teacher telling us how he had just read a new book which had finally, and somewhat reluctantly confirmed his atheism. It was called *The Selfish Gene* and it was written by a young Oxford biologist by the name of Richard Dawkins.

Even then I saw no reason why our increasing knowledge of biological mechanisms should somehow stop us believing in the God who claimed to have created them. But I saw it doing so.

Since then I have seen a steady trickle of mainly young people whose former childish faith has become increasingly unsustainable as their knowledge of the world has increased. Like my biology teacher, in some ways they mourn their loss, but their integrity will not allow them to continue to call themselves Christians.

Still others hang on as Christians but only through closing their minds to the clamouring voice of reason. I can't tell you how many times I have heard of questioning young people who were told to "stop questioning and believe" or "just read the Bible and ask God to confirm it in your heart." In some situations there may be wisdom in that advice but mostly those young people have been left with a sense that at best Christian faith is a leap in the dark, and at worst it may just be a monstrous falsehood which is only sustainable by closing our minds.

This morning I want to try to persuade you that faith is not an irrational leap contrary to reason – it is a thoroughly reasonable trust. I want to encourage you that a properly grounded faith is absolutely life transforming. But I also want to warn you that a poorly grounded faith will always be weak, and indeed is likely to fail at crucial moments.

Even if it doesn't fail completely it will produce half-hearted compromised Christians. An athlete who doesn't believe that their hamstring muscle will hold up under duress will not sprint for the line. A racing car driver who does not trust his brakes will not accelerate down the straight. A Christian who does not really trust that God is faithful to his promises will not "love the Lord their God with ALL their heart and mind and soul and strength."

For the readers of the letter to the Hebrews having a well grounded faith was vital. Dan has been explaining to us that they were tempted to drift back into their old Judaism. A major element of the reason for that was almost certainly to avoid persecution. Judaism was a recognised and tolerated religion in the Roman world. Christianity, on the other hand, was increasingly being identified as a new religion. It was written only a few years before the Empire started to routinely torture and kill men and women simply for worshipping Christ.

At the end of the letter the author will warn

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Hebrews 12:4

He will call them to be prepared to follow Jesus, as he puts it, “outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (Hebrews 13:13).

And last week Dan showed us how Hebrews 10 warns “don’t shrink back” “do have faith.”

 **Hebrews 10:39**

And this is a really serious issue for us. I love being a Christian at this moment in British history, but not because it is easy. Christians are losing their jobs for their faith, being prosecuted for their faith, increasingly reviled for their faith. In that context it is tempting, like the readers of this letter, to adopt an acceptable form of religion. Perhaps still call ourselves Christian but certainly not evangelical. Perhaps still affirming all nice warm fuzzy things that Jesus said like “love your neighbour as yourself” but overlook the more difficult elements of his teaching.

If we do not have a well founded faith that is where most of us will drift. Our author knows that so in Hebrews 11 he sets out to give us a firm foundation for our faith.

1. Faith trusts the invisible

 **Hebrews 11:1**

At first sight this looks like just the “leap in the dark” view of faith I have been questioning.

Esp old AV reads rather like spiritual alchemy

“The substance of things hoped for the evidence of things not seen”

Does faith conjure “substance” out of “hope”?

Does faith provide some evidential basis for things beyond the limits of empirical tests?

On this view of faith it is not surprising that the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described it as

“a protracted suicide of reason”¹

NIV probably right to use the more subjective words.

Faith gives us “confidence”

Faith gives us “assurance”

But how does it do that?

I think we are probably best to describe it like this: Faith is the faculty which everyone has to exercise about two things: the future, and other things we cannot see.

I have faith about all sorts of things in the future:

I have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow

¹ F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, In Nietzsche Reader, 0.

I have faith that my wages will be paid next month
I have faith that the investment I make in my family will
yield fruit in their lives, and their children's lives even
beyond my death.

That faith is not contrary to reason it is based on reason, evidence,
and experience

Similarly I have faith about all sorts of things that I cannot presently
see

I have faith that there is a river a few hundred yards in that
direction

I have faith that when Judy leaves the house four mornings
of every week she goes to work as a Health Visitor

I have faith that 84% of the universe is "dark matter" which I
cannot see.

Again that confidence is not contrary to reason – it is based on
reason, evidence and experience

The faith I have in those different things is of different strengths –
depending on reason, evidence and experience.

I have a strong faith that the Thames has not disappeared since I
last saw it.

I have a somewhat weaker faith that my wages will get paid! –
though your generosity has never failed, and neither has
Andrew Sadler's efficiency.

Some of those "faiths" are easily testable

I can pop over the field to check on the Thames

It won't be long before my faith in the rising sun is either
confirmed or dashed.

Some things I can never test

The mathematics which proves the existence of dark matter is
simply beyond me.

I will not see with mortal eyes the legacy I leave in my family
beyond my death.

I cannot test that, but I know that my grandfather had a
great influence on me and my family and he is long gone
and that is true to a greater or lesser extent in most
families.

So I live by faith!

So EVERYONE lives by faith: not a blind leap in the dark, but a
reasonable trust about unseen and future things.

Augustine, 5th century.

"I began to realise that I believed countless things which I had never seen or which
had taken place when I was not there to see - so many events in the history of the
world, so many facts about places and town which I had never seen, and so much
that I believed on the words of friends or doctors or various other people. Unless we
took these things on trust we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life."²

² Augustine's Confessions, VI.5 Pin-Coffin (Harmondsworth,1961) p117

So then we come to the specific situation of Christian faith.

The Bible gives us firm assurances about the future which cannot be tested here and now

And the bible gives us firm assurances about what is presently going on in the unseen spiritual world – and we cannot just pop out and have a look to see if it is true

Is faith in these things therefore irrational? Absolutely not!

The Bible insists that Jesus rose from the dead as the objective assurance that God will one day restore all things.

The internationally respected historian and theologian N T Wright concludes at the end of his monumental study of the resurrection

" I conclude that the historian, of whatever persuasion, has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and the 'meetings' with [the risen] Jesus, as 'historical events'.... they are, in the normal sense required by historians, provable events"³

Similarly the Bible makes lots of claims about what is going on in the unseen world.

God knows our innermost thoughts

God rewards our good deeds

God protects his children so that nothing can separate them from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus

Is it irrational? Absolutely not!

We can see those claims vindicated in the recorded lives of those who have gone before.

Hebrews 11 is all about that.

V 3 starts with one specific example of “Christian faith”

Hebrews 1:3

Most of you will know that I don't personally believe in a young earth as some Christians do – I am persuaded that the universe at least has the appearance of great age.

This verse is not talking about the age of the universe but the ultimate origin of the universe.

Most modern scientists believe in “the big bang”

But the mathematics of the Big Bang go so haywire that we are still left with the question “what happened before?”

A few are trying to create a model for an eternal universe – perhaps eternally oscillating from big bang to big crunch.

But what is beyond? And when they confidently tell us “nothing is beyond” my question is “how do you know according to the rules of science?”

³ N T Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003). p709.

They cannot – we must exercise faith. Either faith that there is nothing beyond the material world. Or faith that the material world is a majestic, consistent, beautiful, infinitely complex and yet massively simple creation of the eternal God.

- ➔ Are we just left to choose between two leaps in the dark? I don't think so.
 - a. There seems to be an almost universal instinct that a good God lies behind this universe. Children are born theists. Why?
 - b. The evidence of countless witnesses – some who saw things, like the risen Jesus, with their own eyes, other who demonstrated the massive fruitfulness of lives lived for Christ
 - c. The Christian understand of life, our humanity, this world has massive and satisfying explanatory power – whereas a materialist understanding is left saying that fundamental realities like love, justice and human dignity are no more than illusions created by selfish genes.
- ➔ Christians – your faith is built on solid foundations – trust it
- ➔ Non-Christians – you are not being asked to act irrationally – but to do something all people do all the time – trust on the basis of good evidence.

2. Faith is about the heart before it is about actions – Abel

The story Cain and Abel

Both brought offerings to God, but only Abel's was accepted.

There were differences

Abel's was an animal offering, while Cain's was grain – but in the Old Testament both such offerings were advocated

Abel's was from "the firstborn of his flock" while Cain's was just "some of the fruits of the soil"

But those differences are not emphasised in the story

The story emphasises

the Lord's simple choice of Abel's offering over Cain's and what that reveals in Cain's heart – "Cain was very angry"

- ➔ The actions of a person with true Christian faith and someone who is essentially faithless may not be very different
 - a. There may be a some difference – a desire to give of their best vs minimal obedience
 - b. But God sees the two as completely different – accepts one and does not accept the other
 - c. And eventually the true difference will be exposed – Cain murdered Abel!

3. Faith receives extraordinary rewards – Enoch

 **Hebrews 11:5**

A weird little story in Genesis 5:24

Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.

Stands as a little island of hope until the resurrection of Jesus

Enoch trusted God and God rewarded him

 **Hebrews 11:6**

He received eternal life

➔ This is your reward for your faith – your death is not your end

4. Faith calls us to do amazing things – Noah

 **Hebrews 11:7**

Imagine the mockery that Noah received

Building a great big boat far from any stretch of water

“Why waste your life on this project Noah?”

“Noah’s gone mad”

“If he put all that energy into something useful he could have been a rich man by now”

“Your leading your family astray Noah – at least let them get on with something useful”

“What do you trust Noah? Some voice from God or the plain evidence of your eyes? Look around you. Dry ground as far as the eye can see”

But Noah was right.

➔ I want to say to you if you are not a Christian yet:

a. Do realise how paper thin are the foundations of your non-Christian faith?

- And it is a faith – it is a confidence in things unseen
- And yet so weakly founded

b. Do you realise that you are not being asked to make a leap in the dark?

- You are being asked to weigh the evidence
- And develop a reasonable trust

➔ I want to say to you if you are a Christian

a. Is your faith on firm foundations? If not build them – investigate, question, think, read, discuss. True Christian faith is not threatened by any question.

b. And will you build your life on those foundations?

- Do you have the faith of Abel which the Lord sees and honours?
- Do you have the faith of Enoch which will be rewarded with eternal life?
- Do you have the faith of Noah which is prepared to countercultural things and yet which will be proved right?

 **Hebrews 10:39**