

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 14, 2007**

DEFINING FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-6

Six days from now, this coming Saturday evening, we've planned a special dinner celebration to mark the 20th anniversary of the founding of this church. It will be a time to look back at the last 20 years – the first 20 years – in the life of Faith and see what God has done. It will be a time to celebrate what God has done in us, among us, and through us since the first worship service was held on October 4, 1987.

Next Sunday, God willing, I will invite you to look ahead – not back – and think about the next 20 years. We will look ahead and consider what God may want to do in us, among us, and through us to glorify His name, to introduce unbelievers to Jesus the Savior, to make and grow disciples who are strong in Christ and equipped to serve Him in the church and the world, to be the body of Christ here in Kingstowne, in Lorton and Woodbridge and wherever God may choose to scatter us, to love God with every fiber of our being, to love one another in the way that Jesus has loved us, and to love the world which is lost without Him.

The next 20 years. Next Sunday.

Today, though, I want to talk with you about faith. "Faith," you know, is the name which was given to this church when it was born 20 years ago. It is a name with enormous meaning and significance for those who were part of the fellowship at its founding, many of whom are still part of our church family.

Like Abraham in the Old Testament, they heard God calling them to leave the place where they were, to say goodbye to the familiar environs of Fairlington Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA), and to step out in faith. They did not know just what the future would hold. They did not know exactly how or where God would lead them. But they were confident that God *would* lead them and provide for them, equip them and empower them by the Holy Spirit to be the church God wanted them to be as they walked with Him by faith.

These men and women of Faith stepped out in faith trusting that the will of God would never take them where the grace of God would not or could not keep them. That is a confident assurance each of us can have, regardless of the tests or troubles or heartaches or hardships God allows to come into our lives. You can be sure of this: The will of God will never take you where the grace of God cannot – or will not – keep you. I hope this truth gives you comfort and strength for today, and hope for tomorrow.

"Faith" is a name with lasting significance because "faith" is one of the great words of the Bible, a word that gets at the very heart of Christianity. It is a word of such magnitude and importance that without it – without faith – it is impossible to please God.

That is what the Bible says right there in Hebrews 11:6. There is no equivocation. It does not say: “Without faith it is hard to please God.” It does not say: “Without faith it is difficult to please God.” It does not say: “Without faith not very many people can please God.”

No. It says: “Without faith it is impossible to please God.”

Climbing to the top of Mount Everest – that is hard. I couldn’t do it. Most of us couldn’t do it. But we know there are people who have done it. It is an exceptionally difficult thing to do. Yet it is not impossible.

Pitching a perfect game in baseball – 27 batters up, 27 batters down, without a single batter reaching base safely – is extremely hard to do. Only a handful of pitchers in the history of Major League Baseball have done it. That is why it is such a big deal. But it *has* been done. It even happened once in the World Series, in 1956, when Don Larson of the New York Yankees pitched a perfect game against the Brooklyn Dodgers. Difficult? For sure. Rare? Yes. But not impossible.

Yet the Bible tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. That is how important, how essential, faith is. Without it, you and I are powerless (Greek *adunatos*) to please God. It is impossible. It cannot be done.

As Exhibit A of this truth, consider Enoch for a moment. The Bible doesn’t tell us much about him. It *does* tell us in Genesis 5:24 that he walked with God. Walking with God is a picture of companionship or friendship. Enoch knew God personally. He enjoyed the blessing of fellowship with God. And we know (because the Bible tells us) that Enoch pleased God. How did he please God? By his faith. Enoch was a man who lived by faith in God. He was a man who demonstrated a living trust in God. He was a man who lived out his faith. And in doing so he received the smile of God’s approval.

Without faith – and faith must have the proper object if it is to be of real or lasting value,
 without faith in the true and living God,
 without faith in the God who both created everything there is and sustains all things by the power of His word (Hebrews 11:5; 1:3),
 without faith in a God who graciously provides for the children of His love,
 without faith in a God who loves truth and justice and mercy, a God who hates lying and lawlessness and every form of evil the heart of man can devise,
 without faith in the God who loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son into the world to die for us, to redeem us from the shackles of our sin and the crushing weight of our guilt before God, and to set our hearts free to live as the forgiven sons and daughters of God,
 without faith in the God who has made a way – the only way – into the sanctuary of His presence,
 without faith in the God who has made Himself known in creation and history, in the pages of His Word and in the Word incarnate, His Son Jesus Christ,
 without such faith it is impossible to please God.

There is no substitute for it. There is nothing which can take its place. That is how important faith is.

DEFINING FAITH

What does the Bible mean by this quality of faith without which it is impossible to please God? Here are four different ways to understand it:

Let's begin *first* with the definition we find in Hebrews 11:1. There we read that faith is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (NIV). It is the assurance that what we hope for will come to pass, and the conviction of what we do not yet see.

Notice the two words used here to describe faith: "Sure" and "certain." These are not hedge words or weasel words. They are conviction words. "You can count on it" words. Do you remember when Joe Namath of the New York Jets in the old American Football League (AFL) guaranteed a victory over the heavily-favored Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III nearly 40 years ago? Very few people believed Namath. Not many shared his faith. But Namath and the Jets defeated the Colts and stunned the sports world in the process. Joe Namath exhibited this quality of faith.

What is faith? It is the firm and confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is a settled conviction in the heart of what we do not yet see.

F. F. Bruce said that in the same way that our physical eyesight enables us to see visible things, faith is the organ that enables us to see the invisible order of things. It allows us to see things our eyes cannot see, things that belong to the spiritual realm. It enables us to see things that are *not* yet visible because they belong to the future. Things like the fulfillment of God's promises in God's time.

Faith is being *sure* of what we hope for and *certain* of what we do not see. A lot of people may dismiss it or pooh-pooh it, but I believe this kind of faith makes all the sense in the world when it is lodged in the character and provision and promises of God, who has proven Himself over and over again to be faithful and true. And able to do immeasurably more than all we could ever ask or imagine, according to His power that is, even today, at work in us (Ephesians 3:20).

Centuries ago St. Augustine expressed it this way: "Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe."

Second, at its root, faith means "trust." The kind of faith the Bible commends to us, the kind of faith that pleases God, is a living, personal trust in God, a trust that is rooted in God's character and Word. It is a life-shaping attitude toward God in which we rest our weight – the weight of our hopes and fears and dreams and desires – on the faithfulness of God.

It means giving up control and letting God be God in your life. As you do that, as you rest the weight of your life on God's faithfulness, you will discover just how substantial and trustworthy God is. Just as Joe Namath guaranteed a Jets victory in Super Bowl III, I guarantee you that God can handle the full weight of your life with all the burdens and baggage you're carrying around with you. I guarantee it.

But keep in mind that there is more to this kind of faith than just believing in God. Just believing in God isn't enough. James 2:19 tells us that believing in the existence of God merely qualifies us to be demons. For even demons believe God exists.

It is one thing to believe *in* God. It is another thing to *believe God*. To believe God, to take Him at His Word and live accordingly, is to trust Him. And this kind of trust is at the heart of faith.

Martin Luther once said that "faith is the 'yes' of the heart, a conviction on which one stakes one's life." Over and over again, the Bible calls us to this kind of trusting faith. You can rest the full weight of your life on God, you can stake your life on Him, because He is faithful. And not one of His promises to you will ever fail.

Third, faith is what we may call the believer's title deed. That is the meaning of the word in Hebrews 11:1 that is translated "sure" or "assurance." It means a title deed to a piece of property. Although none of us, this side of heaven, has entered into the fullness of the inheritance that is ours through faith in Christ, faith is our title deed to it. It is the conviction or evidence of things not yet fully seen.

James Boice has written that if this were a human title deed, we might have reason to doubt, because people do not always keep their word. But in dealing with God, doubt is unwarranted because of God's nature. Because He is the God of truth, we can believe what God says. Because He is infallible, what God says can be trusted completely. Because He is faithful, we know that God will stand by His promises. Because He is omnipotent, because He is God Almighty (El Shaddai), we can be confident that nothing can ultimately frustrate the fulfillment of God's plan. Nothing.

It is by faith that we take hold of the salvation God graciously offers us in Christ. It is our title deed to salvation and to all the promises of God.

Fourth, faith is the rope, if you will, that connects us or unites us to our Savior. This is an image I think Dr. Graham Smith used to use to describe faith.

Picture, for a moment, a man in a small boat in the Niagara River about a mile upstream from Niagara Falls. The motor has died. There are no oars in the boat. And the current is rapidly pushing him and his boat toward the falls.

On the shore is a man who sees the boater's desperate plight and throws him a rope which the man in the boat catches and secures to the boat. With an heroic effort, the rescuer pulls the boat safely to shore.

The rope did not save the man in the boat, although without the rope he would not have been saved. It was the man who threw him the rope and then pulled him to shore who saved him. In the same way, faith is the rope that connects us or links us to Christ, who alone can save us. Faith is not the thing that saves us. Jesus alone is our Savior. Faith is the means by which we take hold of His saving grace. And even faith – even the rope that connects us to Christ – is a gift of His grace.

Apart from faith in Christ there is no salvation. Without it, it is impossible to please God.

What is faith?

It is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

It is a living and personal trust in God.

It is resting the weight of our lives on the faithfulness of God.

It is our title deed as followers of Christ and members of His family.

It is the rope that connects us to Christ our Savior.

In the 2004 movie “*King Arthur*,” there is a scene in which Arthur (Clive Owen) is preparing for battle, readying his supplies in a dimly lit stable. He is about to lead his knights on their last perilous mission before they will each be granted their freedom. Arthur is a Christian of Roman origin, but all of his knights are pagans who had been forced into service at a young age. Though Arthur has won their allegiance by his selfless leadership, the knights have all retained the religion of their youth.

Arthur, who is not yet king, is troubled that he is under orders to send his knights on such a dangerous assignment just before they are to be released from duty. So he takes his distress and discouragement to God. He puts down the saddle he is carrying and bows in prayer. Lancelot overhears him as he (Lancelot) approaches from the darkness.

Lancelot asks: “Why do you always talk to God and not to me? Pray to whomever you pray that we don’t cross the Saxons.”

“My faith is what protects me, Lancelot,” says Arthur. “Why do you challenge this?”

Lancelot replies: “I don’t like anything that puts a man on his knees.”

Then Arthur says: “No man fears to kneel before the God he trusts. Without faith, without belief in something, what are we?”

No one fears to kneel before the God he (or she) trusts. Without faith – without a living, personal trust in the God who made us and loves us and gave His Son to redeem us – it is impossible to please God.

Let me ask you: How is your faith today? Does your faith protect and strengthen you?

If your faith is real and strong, if it is *alive* and *healthy* and *growing*, give thanks to God and keep on walking with Him by faith.

If your faith is weak or wavering, ask God to increase your faith. Ask Him to make your faith strong. Dr. Smith used to say that faith is not like gasoline, which gets used up as you drive. Instead, faith is like a muscle which gets stronger as you use it. So exercise the faith you have, asking God to make it stronger.

If faith is missing from your life, ask God right here and now for the gift of faith to trust Him with your whole heart and to live under His loving Lordship.

Faith in God, as it says in *The Message*, is “the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living” (Hebrews 11:1). And it is impossible to please God, impossible to gain God’s approval, without it.

May our faith, yours and mine, be alive and strong and growing and pleasing to God. For the next 20 years. And on to eternity. To the glory of His name. Amen.