By Faith
Hebrews 11:1-16

Now, imagine you've got a wealthy friend, and they come from one of these old, aristocratic families, and he lives in one of these beautiful old country houses. And you pay him a visit, and he takes you for a walk around the house. And as you're walking down one of the long hallways he starts pointing out to you all the portraits of his ancestors that line the walls. That's uncle George, the black sheep of the family; there's great uncle David, decorated war hero; there's great great aunty madge who married that rogue who ran off with all the money; and each one has a story.

Well, as we get to chapter 11, the writer wants to do the same. He wants to put his arm around our shoulder and walk with us down this hallway, lined with the portraits of ordinary men and women, who have lived extraordinary lives.

And he wants to do that for a purpose. You see, he finished chapter 10, one of the great warning passages of Hebrews, by quoting from the prophet Habbakuk. Hebrews chapter 10:38, it's God speaking through the prophet, 'My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' And he closes out the chapter by saying, v39, 'But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.'

And if you've been following with us in Hebrews, you'll know the Christians he's writing to are wobbling, and some of them at least are contemplating shrinking back from the cost of being a Christian. And he's encouraging them, saying, 'hey, that's not going to happen with you. Let me take you by the arm and tell you how those who have gone before have done it, let me show you what it looks like to not shrink back when times are hard, to endure, rather than quit. Let me walk you down this hall of fame, and show you what it means to live by faith.'

The Life that Pleases God

In Proverbs it says that 'the fear of man lays a snare' (29:25). And how true that is! If you spend your life trying to win others' approval, looking to people for your affirmation, wanting to please them so that you feel good about yourself, you are going to dig yourself a deep pit. Or if you don't live to please others, you can of course just live to please yourself, but that ends in the dead-end of self-centredness, and there's zero happiness in that.

But the writer says there's another way to live, and it results in a life that pleases God, and by extension brings lasting joy to us. Chapter 11:1-2: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.' So, as he stands at the start of this portrait gallery he tells us, 'you know what unites all of these people I'm going to show you? They all received God's commendation, God could look on each of these men and women and say – I am pleased with you.' Remember Jesus' parable about the talents? – how the master comes home and sees how each servant has or has not invested what was entrusted to him. How does the master respond to those who invested his wealth in a way that pleased him? 'Well done, good and faithful servant… enter into the joy of your master' (Matt 25:21).

You see, there is a way to live that brings pleasure to God and deep, lasting joy to us, and the writer says, 'yup, and it's living by faith.' And it's not just for the super-holy few, this is what the normal Christian life looks like.

And to describe that kind of faith he says in v1: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' In other words, faith keeps its eyes fixed on the horizon of eternity. It weighs up everything in the present by what is going to happen in the future. So, it's not some kind of fossilized relic clinging to the past. It's this real and living certainty, it's this rock solid confidence about the future, that builds its life on God's unchanging character, and grasps hold of God's unfailing promises.

So the person of faith takes a radically different view of the present from that of those around us. Like the art restorer who just knows there's a masterpiece hidden behind the second rate oil painting; like a guy with night vision goggles who can see in the dark what no one else can see, so faith refuses to take the things of this world at face value. It sees the unseen.

Faith sees all of life, the world, riches, success, trials, suffering, it sees it all in the light of eternity. It sees that in all these things, God is up to something behind the scenes. In fact, faith sees God's hands shaping everything. Verse 3: 'By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.'

And for the writer, faith is never just some kind of intellectual agreement that God exists and what he has said is true. It inevitably changes the way you live. Faith acts on it. It risks on it. And that's the kind of life that pleases God, because it trusts him.

So, standing with us at the top of this hallway, the writer starts walking us down the portraits, ok this is what this life of faith looks like.

Living By Faith

And the first portrait he stops at is Abel's, Adam and Eve's second son. And he tells us, v4: 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain [his brother], through which he was commended as righteous.' Now, if you know the story, you'll know that Cain brought some of his crops as a sacrifice for God; whilst Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock. And Genesis tells us 'the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard' (Gen4:4-5). God looked with pleasure on one, and not the other. Now why was that? Well, the writer says why: Abel brought his with faith – he came trusting God. Losing this firstborn of his flock was going to cost him, but he trusted that God was more than worth it. And Cain just didn't seem to come with that kind of attitude. The Bible doesn't tell us, but maybe Cain came grudgingly, or resentfully, or out of duty, not faith.

So, for Abel, faith meant worship, and worship from a right heart. And so for you and me, this living by faith that pleases God is not going to be about going through the religious motions, out of a sense of duty, because we have to, rather

it results in genuine, heart-engaged worship and adoration and commitment and sacrifice, out of a willing, thankful heart.

But just think… what else do you know about Abel? He ends up murdered by his brother. So get that! The very first portrait of faith that we come to, ends up murdered for his faith. Not a great start for the health, wealth and prosperity gospel is it? But that's what the guys he's writing to are facing. Live by faith, the writer's saying, and yes, it might just cost you your life, or it might mean prison, or it might mean you being fired from your work.

So, the first thing we can tell, is that living by faith means **costly worship from the heart.** But that cost is worth it, because Christ is worth it.

But then he moves us on to the second portrait, and it's Enoch's. Now in all the genealogies in Genesis, you get this repeating refrain: so and so lived for x number of years, and he died… and he died… and he died. And the only one who breaks that deadly monotony is Enoch. Genesis 5:24: 'Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.' And the writer tells us, v5, 'By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death' and 'before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.'

I once heard someone say that the reason God took Enoch was because they went out for a walk together one day, and they walked and they talked, and they talked and they walked, and they lost all track of time, and where they'd got to, and then Enoch suddenly realized it was getting dark and that he was miles from home, and knowing what he was thinking, the Lord turned to him and said, 'well Enoch, it's getting late, maybe you'd better just come home with me.'

So, the second thing we can say about this life of living by faith is that **it means walking with God daily**. It means being in step with him, rather than the world. It means trusting Him that He is good and His purposes are good in the daily rhythm of life and work. As the writer tells us in v6, living by faith means drawing near to God, knowing that He rewards those who seek Him. That the mundane tasks of daily life, that seem to offer no reward, like changing nappies/diapers or helping your child with their homework and those high profile ones that seem to promise stunning reward, only find their true significance in Jesus, because He's the ultimate reward. It means trusting that God is your real treasure, your great reward, when there seems to be no reward and when all this earthly treasure is poured into your lap.

But then the writer nudges us on to the next portrait, and it's Noah. Verse 7: 'By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark.' So the third thing we can say is that living by faith **means obeying God, even when it looks stupid**. I mean imagine the ridicule that man endured for building this massive boat in the middle of an arid desert! But the person who's going to live by faith and please God, takes God at his word, and builds his life upon it, even when the surrounding culture mocks it. He orders his life in the 'now' based upon what God says about the future. Because he trusts God's word more than all the voices of those around him.

And faith for Noah meant being prepared to be different and to stand out: to trust more in what God thought of him than what others thought of him. But often we don't want to stand out, and we don't want to be opposed and we do want everyone to like us. Now, whilst there is absolutely no reason to go round deliberately getting up people's noses, the truth is that getting in to step with Jesus and his priorities is going to put us out of step with just about everyone else. And faith says, 'I'm prepared to take that, because I know who I'm following, I know how this is going to end.'

And by living like that, the writer says in v7, Noah 'became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.' Like the others, he too was commended by God, and found favour with God, because he trusted God.

But then we're under the next portrait - and it's *the* great example of faith in the Old Testament. And if Noah teaches us that living by faith means obedience even when it looks stupid, Abraham teaches that living by **faith means obeying God even when your future looks uncertain.**

Verse 8: 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.' Now I don't know how old you were when you left home, but theologians reckon Abraham was 75. But you young guys, don't get any wrong ideas. I mean if any of you boys are still living in your parent's house aged 75, they won't be thanking you!

But 75? That's old to suddenly start a new life isn't it! After all, this guy's established, he's settled, now's the time when most blokes would be looking forward to their retirement, and take up fishing or golf, or carpet bowls. And for Abraham, responding with obedience to the call of God meant to uproot and leave all that was familiar, and say goodbye to home, and friends and family, and turn his back on safety and security, and to start trekking across a desert not having a clue where he's going… I mean why would someone do that?

Well you'd do it if you trusted God, and He told you to do it, and if he meant more to you than all this other stuff that surrounds you. Abraham was prepared to leave all the comfort and security of home, and go live in tents, because, in the words of the writer in v10, 'he was looking forward to the city that has foundations.' Abraham was prepared to give all this up, he was prepared to obey, and live with uncertainty in the present, because he knew his future was absolutely certain, because that eternal wealth meant more to him than present comfort. And he was happy to dwell in tents now if it meant he would get to the ultimate, heavenly city.

So, the call of God and responding to that with faith and obedience can involve unsettling uncertainty, when the Lord doesn't let you see how things are going to pan out, and you feel like your living in a foreign land, rather than a land of promise. But faith trusts God even in the uncertainty and would rather have that, and be in his purposes than live in comfort and security and be out of them. And

just ask yourself, do you think Abraham regrets it now? Do you think Abraham is in glory wishing he'd stayed at home? No. Living trusting God, looking to the eternal reward, even in the midst of uncertainty, does not lead to regret, because whilst you may not know how things are going to work out in the short or medium term, you know with certainty how they're going to go in the *long*-term. And that's what faith is living for.

But then the writer moves us on to the last portrait, and it's Abraham's wife. Sarah. *Sarah?* What's *she* doing in the hall of faith? I mean, I thought the whole point was that she *didn't* respond with faith! Isn't the point that when God told Abraham he would have a son in his old age, Abraham believed God, but Sarah just laughed out of scorn? 'How could an old woman like me possibly conceive?' What's she doing here?

Interesting isn't it. Verse 11: 'By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.' So, between her laughing out of unbelief, and her conceiving, something changed in Sarah's heart, and the writer tells us it changed because she realized that God was faithful to his promises. That when he speaks he will act, when he makes a promise he will deliver, whatever everything else says.

So what Sarah teaches us, is that living by faith, this life that pleases God, **means trusting God, even when your circumstances say otherwise.** Even when it feels like the situation is impossible, even when it looks like the odds are hopelessly stacked against you, even when it seems like there is every reason not to believe, faith trusts God that he will stay true to his word and his promise to us in Christ, that he will never leave us or forsake us, because it considers him faithful.

And I don't know about you. But I'm glad Sarah made the list. Because it tells us, this isn't about superheroes. It's about normal men and women, who when they encounter God, can change. People like you and me, who can move from doubt and fear and unbelief, to trusting God and taking him at his word. That tells me that everyone of us can have our portraits on that wall. Not because we're some kind of super-sized faith hero, but because Christ is.

But as we close I want to make one last point, and it's the point the writer makes. He says of these men and women, and he's thinking especially of Abraham and Sarah but it's good for them all, that they, v13-14, 'acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.' Then, v16, 'But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.'

Longing for home

Firstly, I want to talk to any of you who wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian. And maybe you hear this stuff about faith and think 'yeh, good as it goes, but that's not me.' But maybe this bit is. You see the writer's saying that these people of faith, looked out on this present world and they knew it wasn't it. They knew there was something better, and that's what they set their hearts on pursuing.

And I reckon that inside everyone of us there is this longing for home, not for what was, but for what should be. You look out on the world and you see the suffering and the injustice and the poverty and the relationship breakdown and you think: Man, things shouldn't be like this. There has to be something better than this. Well, when you feel like that, it's these echoes of longing for a better city. Or in a moment of reflection maybe you realize that all the money and all the sex and all the shopping in the world will never give you what you are looking for. And when you realise that, even for a moment, it's that homesickness breaking in, and you know this world and all it offers ultimately isn't it, it isn't home. And the only thing that will ever truly satisfy is Christ and knowing his love and his plans and his purposes for you. It's only the heavenly city that will ultimately give you what you are looking for.

But what about for those of us who are Christians? What should all this mean for us? If, like them, we are strangers and exiles here, and this isn't home, and we're looking for the city that is to come, how should that affect the way we live now? What will it mean for the way you conduct yourself at work, or use your money, or treat your spouse, or raise your kids, or behave at school?

Well I'm not going to try and answer that for you. But just for a moment imagine what living by faith meant for these guys he's writing to in first century Rome and all they face. And imagine their portraits on that wall: By faith they endured persecution and stayed faithful to Jesus. Now imagine your and my portraits on that wall, what might the next generation, our children or our children's children, say of us? By faith… what? By faith she swam against the tide at school. By faith he capped his standard of living and gave everything else away to missions. By faith she took a stand on campus for the cause of Christ. By faith he turned down a promotion so he could teach Sunday School and invest in the next generation. By faith he sacrificially loved his wife when everything told him to run.

You know, the only reason this life of faith isn't crazy, is that ultimately it is not faith in ourselves, but faith in the eternal, all-powerful, supremely good God, in his character and his word. And ultimately, it isn't these guys or you and me who are the heroes of faith, it's God, it's Christ who is the real hero. And it's because he is 100% faithful that you can live trusting him for the future, whatever is happening in the present.