

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

December 11, 2022

What is Faith?

Hebrews 11:6

Prayer: *Father, I just again praise you and thank you for this time. I just praise you and thank you for what it represents. Just the fact that of your incarnation, your coming to this planet, the gift, the ultimate gift and we thank you for that. And Lord, this morning we're going to look into the means that we have of appropriating that gift and that is faith. And so I pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit. Lord, without your spirit, as I say over and over again, this is a hopeless task. And so we pray your spirit would guide us, accompany us and make this of permanent value and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well the scripture we're going to be looking at this morning is Hebrews 11:6 which says: *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. I'd like you to just take a moment and think about that statement, "without faith it is impossible to please God."*

Could anything be more important than faith? So we need to ask just what is faith? And again scripture in *Hebrews 11* says: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* F. B. Meyer said it well, he said, "Faith is the sixth sense. It makes us as sure of unseen or future things, which we know about only through the divine Word, as we are of things which we can see and touch." It's hard to put into precise words exactly what faith is, and so I struggled with this many, many years ago and I came up with a definition of faith that says this, "Faith is a God-given attitude characterized by a certainty of conviction that produces appropriate action."

So first off we know faith is a gift. It's a gift that's given to us by God. We know that from *Ephesians 2:8* which says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* And secondly we know there's a huge difference between faith and belief and the difference lies in the conviction of the belief.

Years ago I heard an analogy about the difference between faith and belief. It was a fictional tale involving a tightrope walker performing up at Niagara Falls. The tightrope walker would stretch a wire across Niagara Falls and each day he would cross it to the

amazement and amusement of the onlookers. One of the onlookers was a man who had talent in organizing a demonstration of the tightrope walker's skill and also making a little bit of money from that skill, and so they forged a partnership. The man would be the barker whipping up the crowds who would actually pay to see the skills of the tightrope walker as he walked. And it worked well for a while but after a while the crowd started to diminish. So the barker talked the tightrope walker into pushing a wheelbarrow specifically designed for the tightrope and in the wheelbarrow he placed a monkey. Well that proved a huge hit, and the crowd continued to show up and to pay to see the tightrope walker and his monkey cross Niagara Falls.

Well day in and day out the tightrope walker and his monkey walked the tightrope while the barker shouted out his praises; and after a year or so watching the tightrope walker performing every day, the barker noticed that the crowds were once again starting to get thin. And so he proposed to up the ante. He told the tightrope walker that he believed he was the best he had ever seen, he believed he had extraordinary talent but really they needed somehow to increase the drama. Well they thought about it for a while. The tightrope walker finally said, well, since you believe in my skill and since you've observed my skill in action every day for these last few years, why don't you turn your belief into faith,

and you jump into the wheelbarrow instead of the monkey. You see, the difference between faith and belief is that belief, belief can be convinced of the tightrope walker's skill, he'd even shout out to others how incredibly skillful and talented that person is but only faith is willing to get in the wheelbarrow.

I said faith is a God-given attitude characterized by a certainty of conviction that produces appropriate action. Faith is the core and the substance of the gospel itself. The word "gospel" simply means good news, and the good news is that God has found a way to address the mess that our forefather Adam has gotten us into. In fact faith is our only hope.

You see, Adam was the fountainhead, Adam was the very beginning, the very start of the human race and he was flawless just like his creator until he actively and openly rebelled. He believed the devil when the devil said God was denying Adam his chance to be like God. And so by eating the forbidden fruit Adam turned his perfection into imperfection and every subsequent offspring of Adam and Eve shared in that imperfection. In short, none of us is born fit for heaven; every single one of us falls short. As God puts it in *Romans 3: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* You see falling short of God's glory, falling short of his perfection disqualifies all of us for heaven. That's the bad news.

It's the second part of the verse that's the good news. It says: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. To be justified is to have the debit of our sin offset by the credit of the righteousness of Jesus, and the only way we can obtain that righteousness is through faith. Again Romans 3: This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Romans 5: Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I mean the stunning beauty of the gospel is that Jesus lived this perfect life and then he laid down that life at the cross so that we by faith could take his righteousness and appropriate it as our own so that we can stand before God not clad in our own sins but clad in Christ's righteousness that is now accounted as our righteousness because of our faith in Jesus. I mean now what Adam has done has been undone by Christ and our faith in his sacrifice. So faith literally is the key that unlocks the door to heaven itself for those who believe.

So the next logical question is, okay, where does faith come from? Well, *Romans 10* says: *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* So faith comes by hearing the good news of the

gospel, that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again. Okay. That brings up another question. Can you believe that and still not have saving faith?

Well, the vast majority of people who call themselves Christians, they all qualify as believing that. And as I said, faith and belief are two vastly different things. I heard an excellent description of the difference between faith and belief on a podcast that was addressing an issue that a lot of people have with God, it's about the question of God's hiddenness. How many times have you heard somebody say, you know, if God would only present himself in a way that's much more obvious, I wouldn't have such a hard time believing him. Why doesn't God make himself more obvious?

Well, the podcast I was listening to featured an apologist by the name of Travis Dickinson, and he was speaking about the famous atheist Richard Dawkins. And he imagined the scenario in which someone famous as an atheist like Dawkins, let's say he's walking down the street past a row of bushes. And as he passes the first bush he sees it burst into flame and announce, "I am God and I'm speaking to you right now, Richard Dawkins." By the time he gets to the second bush, it too bursts into flame and it says, "Richard Dawkins, this is God speaking to you." Well, let's say he went past ten different bushes and all ten of them burst into flame,

each of them claiming a different aspect of Richard Dawkins' personal history, all of them from the voice of God, all of them from the center of these now nine burning bushes that are on fire. At the end of that experience do you think Richard Dawkins would believe in God? Well, the logical answer would be "of course." But here's the critical part. Would that belief be the same as faith? And the answer is a resounding no. And God is not after belief; he is after faith. James tells us that even demons have belief in God, in fact they have excellent theology. Does that theology, does that belief save them? Well, allow James to answer. He says: *You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!*

So there are many different answers to the objection that God just doesn't show himself enough to us but first and foremost is the fact that an obvious demonstration of who God is would not produce faith, it would produce belief and belief is not remotely the same as faith. Folks accuse God of hiding himself. You know, if God would only write it on the sky, spell it out in the stars, take over the Internet, take over TV or television then surely everyone would believe in him. But like I said, God's not after belief; he's after faith. And God doesn't make himself obvious so people claim he either doesn't exist or he doesn't care to reveal himself.

Scripture lays out at least three different scenarios where God overwhelmingly revealed himself, and in each case we didn't respond with anything other than mere belief. And like I say once again, that's not even remotely related to faith. Just consider the times that God made himself obvious to Israel during their enslavement in Egypt. I mean, think about it. We have these ten spectacular miracles that take place where devastating things happened in Egypt and right in the center of that nation is the little nation of Israel and it's absolutely protected from frogs and from lice and from blood and from darkness and hail; you name it. And it all ends up with the Red Sea parting its ways and the Jews marching through it on dry ground while the Egyptians following them wind up drowning as the sea returning to its original form. Could God possibly have made himself more obvious?

You know how long it took for that experience of God's presence to just evaporate? Let me read it to you. This is *Exodus 16*. It says: *And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt. Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the children of Israel said to them, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt,*

when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." How long did God's spectacular show of himself last? Well to quote it: *"On the 15th day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt."* That's a month and a half. A month and a half. Ten spectacular miracles and the final one is literally a parting of the Red Sea and the net effect lasts six weeks.

Could God have made himself even more obvious? Well, he did once on Mount Sinai. If you remember, his own chosen people were absolutely terrified and they begged him to be much less obvious. I'll just read it to you. This is *Exodus 20*. It says: *Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."*

This is a pretty impressive display of who God is. And Moses goes up to Mount Sinai to speak directly to God who's made himself so present and so obvious that the Jews are terrified and they're begging him to stop. Moses is up there for forty days, and in only forty days the smoke and the sound of the trumpets and the quaking

of the mountain itself and the voice of God which was so terrifying that they begged Moses to make it stop, it all goes out the window. Within forty days they had completely forsaken God and were worshipping golden calves. Again *Exodus 32*, it says: *Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

You see, the miracles produced mere belief. And mere belief is destroyed by circumstance. Well, maybe God needs to show himself even more than he did on that mountaintop, wouldn't that make faith a simpler and easier to attain goal? I mean, God certainly showed himself to Israel and they begged Moses to act as an intermediary for them because he was far too terrifying to deal with but what about Jesus? What about God in the flesh? I mean it's pretty hard to mount an argument that God has been too hidden when he literally came down to our planet and lived among us. I mean not only did he live among us but he did many spectacular miracles that had almost no effect whatsoever at producing faith in the people. Belief, absolutely; but faith, not so much.

In fact we even have Jesus, God himself on record stating what the

reaction of the average person was to his miraculous feeding of the crowds. This is *John 6:26*. It says: *Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled."* You know, the day after Jesus had done this, this miracle of the loaves and the fishes, he had another confrontation with the same crowd. You got to remember, he had just fed a crowd of five thousand with five loaves and two fishes and afterward they gathered up twelve baskets of fragments, and the crowd knew full well what he had done. I mean, hadn't God made himself obvious? And wasn't his miraculous power made visible? Absolutely. Well scripture describes the effect that it had on the crowd who confronted him the very next day. This is *John 6:30*. It says: *Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD FROM HEAVEN TO EAT.'"*

Now you've got to kind of read behind the lines to understand what they're really saying here. What they're saying is, okay, you did a miracle yesterday, big deal. What kind of miracle are you going to do for us today? And by the way, Jesus, your miracles are not nearly as impressive as our Moses' miracles are. I mean you multiplied loaves and fishes that were already there. Moses

started with nothing and he fed the whole nation of Israel. Your stuff came from the earth; Moses' stuff came from heaven itself. Sorry, Jesus, we're just not that impressed. I mean, you see what God has to put up with here? I mean think of a miracle, make it as spectacular as you want, we humans have within us the capacity to swat it down as if it's nothing and demand something even more spectacular.

And again, case in point, I mentioned Richard Dawkins and how he might react if every bush he walked by burst into flame and named his name; would that make a difference? I don't think so, and I think we have proof of that. An article in *Apologetics Press* by Eric Lyons. He has this amazing quote of Richard Dawkins, and how he would respond to a spectacular miracle. He says: "In 2012, renowned atheist Richard Dawkins was questioned about his unbelief in God. Specifically, he was asked, 'What proof, by the way, would change your mind?' He quickly responded by saying, 'That is a very difficult and interesting question because, I mean, I used to think that if somehow, you know, great, big, giant 900-foot-high Jesus with a voice like Paul Robeson suddenly strode in and said, 'I exist and here I am,' but even that, I actually sometimes wonder if that would...' though Dr. Dawkins was interrupted, he clearly left the impression that even if God appeared to him, taking the form of a 'giant 900-foot-high Jesus' with a mighty voice, even

that encounter would probably not convince him."

You see, there's a continuum that takes us from unbelief to belief and then only by the grace of God from belief to faith. And Dawkins at least had the honesty to say that he won't move even from even belief to belief no matter what God does. So the next time you hear someone complain about how hidden God is, point out to him how often and how explicit God was in revealing himself and how he took that revelation and just made it nothing.

I mentioned last week God's indictment of all of mankind and it's centered around the fact that God has made his presence incredibly obvious in the things that he's made. *Romans 1:20* says: *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.* And so we need to look at this from God's standpoint and what God is telling us is that every cloud, every star, every bug, every plant, tree and animal, they're all shouting, "Look at us! Look at what God has done in us!" And our culture shouts back, "God didn't do that. Nothing did that." That's what we say. I mean we're capable of creating absolutely nothing ex nihilo, which is simply Latin for "from nothing" which is the way God creates.

You know, I've gotten into arguments with folks, I say, I tell you what, starting from nothing and with nothing just make me a maggot. That's all I'm asking for, and see how far you get. I'm not asking you to make me a tiger, I'm not asking you to make an eagle or a great white shark, I just want a maggot. I mean, that's pretty low on the impressive list of creatures, I would say. But if we took billions and billions of dollars and the very best minds that we had, we still couldn't possibly come up with a maggot from scratch. God says: *His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.* And so God has revealed himself multiple times and it wasn't enough. And he's revealed himself in creation hundreds of billions of times and it's still clearly not enough, and the best that these miraculous deeds can do is produce belief which is not even remotely the same as faith.

So what exactly is faith? Well, I go back to my definition, which again it's highly inadequate and it's still the best I can come up with. Faith is a God-given attitude characterized by a certainty of conviction that produces appropriate action. I mean we know faith is a gift because God's told us. He said: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.* We also know that the difference between belief and faith is an attitude based on a level of conviction. And finally we see from James how that conviction has to eventuate in

appropriate action. This is what James says, he says: *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

So just what does the appropriate action that faith produces look like? Well, unfortunately folks have been battling over that understanding for centuries and it's extremely easy to get stuck on one extreme or the other. One side is called "easy believism;" you simply agree to a set of facts, Jesus was God, he was born sinless, he lived a sinless life, he went to a cross, died, rose from the dead. Agree all of that is true and you're in, you're good.

The other side is called "the works gospel." You believe that Jesus did all that he claimed and yet somehow or other his work on the cross paying for your sin is not enough so you have to add to Christ's works your own works in order to make yourself good enough for heaven. Neither of these is the faith that God is speaking of. And genuine faith can only come when the Spirit of God enters into you when you surrender your life to Christ. The reason why the works gospel fails is because it focuses on me and what I can contribute to saving myself and in fact we are incapable of saving ourselves. And this goes all the way back to Adam and the imperfection that he brought to himself and to all of us. *For all*

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; and any effort that we make, no matter how hard we try, is going to be tinged with the imperfection that's now part of our nature.

God says in *Isaiah 64*: *But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.* And *Isaiah* here, he's not speaking of our sins, he's not speaking of our misdeeds, he's talking about the very best efforts we could possibly make. He's talking about our righteousness. And what he's saying is that the very best that we can do falls so far below the level of perfection that it's as if it is a filthy rag. And only what Christ has done for us passes the standard of absolute perfection, and it's that perfection we gain only through faith. Easy believism reduces Christianity to a set of mere beliefs no more life changing than a belief in politics or a culture. Genuine faith is always accompanied by a changed life due to the new Lord of that life who now lives inside you.

So how does that work? Well, sometimes it's helpful to you to just look at an example of what genuine faith is and to see how it works to see what God is after here. We had an example of that that took place just last week in an absolutely awful situation. *Athena Strand* was a seven-year-old girl was kidnapped and murdered in Texas last week by a contract Fed Ex driver. You probably heard of

it. The driver confessed to the murder, the authorities said it was a crime of opportunity. He saw the little girl, he hit her, stole her and killed her. But he's not the story here. Actually even little Athena is not the story here. As horrific as that crime was, I'm confident that she is in heaven with her Lord and Savior right now, but it's her grandfather that I want to focus on and the comments that he made in the days shortly after her kidnapping and death.

Fox News reported in an article headlined -- quote -- "Athena Strands' Grandfather Says He Forgave Fed Ex Driver Accused of Kidnapping and Murdering Seven-year-old." Quote -- "Athena Strand's grandfather said he forgave the Fed Ex driver accused of abducting and murdering his 7-year-old granddaughter in Texas after requesting 'five minutes alone in a cell with the psycho.'"

"I can't quiet my mind and I have to share this. A friend just asked me the other day if I believe God speaks to people? I happen to know He does, as He is speaking to me now," the girl's grandfather, Mark Strand, wrote in a heartbreaking Facebook tribute on Saturday. "This flesh, this man that I am, is angry and I want five minutes alone in a cell with the psycho that took our Athena away from us, but there's a soft gentle voice in the back of my head telling me I need to forgive him."

That soft gentle voice, that soft gentle voice in the back of his head is the indwelling Spirit of Christ, but he readily admits that spirit is not alone. And he goes on to say -- quote -- "This flesh man, wants that psycho to burn in hell for all eternity, yet that gentle voice continues to tell me, I need to forgive him," the grandfather continued. "This flesh man hopes he remains blind and deaf to the message of salvation and never sets foot in the same heaven that I know in my heart my darling Athena resides in now."

I mean Athena's grandfather readily admits he is at war with his flesh. You see the Spirit of Christ who comes with faith, who lives inside us is never alone inside us. There's always our flesh and there's always our spirit that wants its way. I mean I can almost guarantee you that spirit was shouting, "Why did God let this happen? Why didn't God protect her?" See, the battle between the flesh and the spirit never stops and extraordinarily awful circumstances like this cause the flesh to scream out in pain. But it's a struggle that's felt by every believer and it goes all the way back to the apostle Paul who said in *Romans 7*: *I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this*

body of death? Paul's crying out he can't fix this, and he's speaking to every single one of us who thinks we can kind of earn our way into heaven by a works gospel. Just like Athena's grandfather, you can want to do good but find another spirit within you wanting the exact opposite.

Paul also found the solution. It was in that very same still small voice that spoke to Athena's grandfather, who says in *Romans 8*:
For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. See, this is also the place where the grace of God gets shed not wholesale, not to all of those in the Christian community but retail, only to the individual who needs it the most. I've often said it, you don't get boiling oil grace until you're thrown in boiling oil. I mean, which of us wouldn't feel the exact same rage as Athena's grandfather felt and yet when faith genuinely comes and the Spirit of Christ enters into us, we hear a different voice.

Athena's grandfather said -- quote -- "And yet, that gentle voice persists. Why you ask? Because Hate is a powerful force that will take root in your soul. God wants to protect us all from that hate. Hate is the gateway for the Evil we see growing in the world today. If you stood that man before me right now, because of the hate that's trying to root itself in my mind, I would probably kill

him," the elder Strand wrote. "Then that hate would root itself in my heart and I would be destroyed. That gentle voice is the Holy Spirit of God speaking to me right now. He's reminding me that my savior Jesus, willingly laid Himself on a cross and died in my place to reconcile me to God the Father, but also that He did that for All of Us, even this man that my flesh so Hates at this very moment."

That's exactly what boiling oil grace looks like. You and I have not received that boiling oil grace, but Athena's grandfather certainly has. You can feel the battle that is going on inside this man's soul, but you can also see how genuine faith works even in the most extreme circumstances.

It says: The grandfather's post went on to say, "I am a sinful man, yet I've heard this voice before and I miss hearing this voice. If I allow this hate to consume me, that voice will fade and eventually be silenced. Then that ugly spirit of hate will have succeeded and that's why this gentle voice persists to tell me I need to forgive this man. It's for my protection and my peace. It's to set me free from this hate and allow me to continue to hear God's gentle voice."

Now, I love this man, I love what he has said, but I can tell you

and I believe 100 percent he'd agree with me, this man's flesh is not capable of reacting this way. But God's spirit is. And God's power is given freely to all those who by faith trust in him. And it's by that power that he freely admits -- quote -- "There's not one ounce of my flesh that wants to do this or say this, but my spirit has heard God's voice and right now, while tears flood my eyes, I declare publicly that I forgive this man!" Strand declared. "Hate will not win. I hope my family will understand that I don't do this for the sake of this man. I do this for the sake of my family and myself and to Honor the voice of God who is giving me the strength to say this," he said, concluding his post. "I do this to honor our precious Athena who knew no hate. This man won't be allowed any real estate to live in my brain, he belongs to God and God's justice will (be) done. Love Conquers All and Forgives. Today, I choose Love and hate loses."

Well if you're looking for an example of what the supernatural gift of faith looks like, this is it. You know, I opened up this message with these words, I said: *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.* When you think about it, Athena's grandfather gave God the only gift that we humans are capable of giving, that has any meaning whatsoever to God. I mean, we can't give him money, we

can't give him things because he already owns all things. We can't give him our good deeds because that standard says that those deeds are filthy rags. What is truly precious to God is what this man has given and it's something that every one of us has the ability to give as well, it is a certainty of conviction when that certainty has been sorely tested.

Faith is a God-given attitude characterized by a certainty of conviction that produces appropriate action. And I can't think of an action more appropriate to faith than the one Athena's grandfather just took, and we would do well to emulate his example. God says, *without faith it is impossible to please God*. But by faith, under the worst possible circumstance, we can listen to that still small voice within each of his sheep and bring peace and strength to ourselves and genuine pleasure to God. Let's pray.

Father, I just praise you and thank you for the gift of faith. I just thank you for this extraordinary display of the strength and the power that is inherent in faith. I just think of the glorious Spirit of Christ within this poor, broken man speaking in a way that speaks to us of your grace and your power and your glory and how much this man has glorified you in the worst of circumstances. So I pray for him, I pray for his family, I pray for all those that are associated with this awful deed and awful circumstance that you

would just continue to bless them, be near to them, be real to them. And Lord may, as always happens, may all those things no matter what they are, those things that are done for evil can be redounded and turned around and done for good because of your grace, strength and power, I thank you in that, in Jesus' name. Amen.