

Fellowship Bible Church
Sermon Series: God's Hall of fame
"The Certainty of our Future"
10-23-11
Crawford W. Loritts, Jr

TEXT: HEBREWS 11:1-3, 6 (ESV)

We have just witnessed the stories of people who have responded to the love of the LORD Jesus -- kids, and adults. Baptism is not just some little ritual that we go through. It is a sign and a symbol of the powerful love of the LORD Jesus who has removed every barrier, every obstacle, and every hindrance. He says to everybody in the world, "Come." If you are here this morning and have not yet responded to the LORD Jesus, He has removed every barrier and He says to you I want to forgive you. I want to love you. I want to fill you with hope and meaning and purpose. Will you let me love you? That is what the cross is all about. You don't have to lie down another night wondering what could happen to you if you should die. You don't have to have another question about the guilt in your heart and life. You don't have to struggle with the fear and uncertainty of what is going to happen to you later on. All you have to do is say, "LORD Jesus, thank You for dying on the cross for me. I turn from my sin." Will you bow your heads with me? If there is anybody here like that right now, this very moment, this very instant, why don't you say LORD Jesus I am not going to run from You anymore. Cleanse me of my sin. Come into my heart and life. Make me Your child.

Father, thank You for the cross. Thank You for the freedom that is found in Jesus. Thank You, Father, for the release of fear and guilt and anxiety that comes by being loved by Jesus. LORD, I just pray and how my heart is broken this morning in a good way because I know that You are seeking and saving the lost today, and I just pray that no one will leave this place without the certainty of their relationship with Jesus today. God, I pray that You will do it. Thank You for Your grace. Thank You for Your goodness. Thank You for baptism. Thank You for the cross. Thank You for Your word. Thank You for one another. Thank You, oh God, for all that You have done for us. We love You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

You may be seated. Well, good morning Fellowship. It is good to see you this morning. I am always deeply moved by baptisms to see what God has done in the hearts and lives of people. It is unbelievable. I hope we never get over the cross. Amen. Don't ever get over that. Don't ever get over that. I think sometimes in our walk and relationship with God we get so concerned about our maturity, and sometimes maturity is a code word for not talking about what it means to know Christ anymore. We get on to the other subset of things that we forget to hold the cross up high. While I am kind of into that let me just say a little warning to those of us who are Bible church people. That is our Achilles' heel believe it or not, and sometimes we can get so deep into the discipleship content we forget about the gateway to heaven. Let's keep talking about Jesus. Let's keep talking about His greatness and His love.

Well, I am embarking on a new series today. By the way I want to add to what Joe said. If you are here as a visitor thank you for coming. We want to welcome you and thank you for being here. We trust that if there is anyway we can be of help or encouragement to you, and I say this every Sunday but I really mean it from the bottom of our hearts, please let us know. Please let us know. Sometimes people will slip into a church with needs and then they will slip out and they will say, "You know, nobody connected with me." Well, I say this -- not defensively -- only God is omniscient. So, if you have needs and there is a way in which we can come alongside of you, let us know and we would really love to do that, love to do that.

For the next five weeks we are going to be in a series on faith. I have entitled the series, and this is not original with me (many people have been using this expression) God's Hall of Fame. We are going to park in Hebrews chapter 11 for the next five weeks. We are going to talk about faith. I suppose you are wondering, "Well, Crawford, why are you talking about faith?" I have to tell you, as I have told you before, in a very real sense the way I choose messages is I bounce it off of some of our leaders and our worship team, but honestly I just go before the LORD and pray and say, "LORD, what would you have me to teach and to share?" I feel led to talk about faith.

I suppose another subtext to this, another reason why we need to press into faith, is because it seems to be this season, not just here at our church, but everywhere I turn there seems to be this haze of uncertainty, this haze of fear. I find that we are playing it safe. We are frightened about tomorrow. We are uncertain about next month and we can ratchet it back. Then we get into this thing where we begin to live a defensive Christian life, and there is nothing supernatural about what we do and how we think, how we act, and how we respond. The Christian life is not about predictability. I hate to say this but I was thinking about it this morning. All of us want a predictable life. How many of you would like to have life a little bit more predictable? Every last one of us. I would like to have some certainty. I would like predictability. I would like to know this is definitely going to happen this day, that there are not going to be any surprises, that everybody is going to act right, and that there are not going to be any curve balls. You know, God hasn't called us to live that way. So, I want to say to every last one of us if you are looking for a certain life you are not going to get it. So, give it up. Give it up. Life is always going to be uncertain, and particularly the Christian life. The reason why faith is so important for believers is that faith demonstrates the reality of a supernatural God to a watching world. So, your life and my life is a laboratory for the work of God. That is why faith is so important. We are never going to live the Christian life apart from faith.

I want to say a few things by way of introduction. Faith in the Bible is always a verb – even when it is a noun. I know the English teachers are going to write me. "Crawford, you are teaching our children wrong things about grammar;" but faith in the Bible is always a verb, even when it is a noun. What do you mean by that? Faith is always moving us forward. Faith was never meant to be theoretical. It was never meant to be just purely intellectual. I know there is something called the body of faith, the body of truth, and we will use your faith as synonymous to creeds and what we intellectually accede; but really faith in the Bible is God's engine. It is God's engine. There is no movement in the Christian life apart from faith. I just think we all need to accept that reality – that faith is a verb.

And I would like to say something on a personal level in terms of the driving force behind all that. I want to say to all of us here, and that is, if we never do more than we think we can do, we will always do less than we should do; thus, the reason for faith. If you only live a predictable life, if you only do the things that you think you can do, there is nothing supernatural about your life. There is nothing inviting about your life. There is nothing compelling about your Christianity. There is nothing God about us. If you only just do the things that you can do, you will never do the things that you should do. That is more than just a statement. That summarizes from a relational perspective what I call the transactional reality of faith. It pushes us beyond the norm and where we are.

Now I also have to say this, too, and I am going to come back to this. Faith presupposes opposition. Faith presupposes opposition. You don't have biblical faith unless you are opposed. It is the same as courage. You are courageous for something. Courage is always defined within the context of risk. That is why you are courageous. There is a risk. Faith is the same thing and in a different way faith is always defined in the context of opposition. If you are not opposed, you are not exhibiting faith. That is the reason we have faith because something is against me. The predictable is against me. The circumstances are against me. In my

reality there is a gap between here and there. This is uncertain here and this is coming against me. I really want us to understand that. We are great at articulating the intellectual side of faith, but I want to encourage you that if you are struggling, if you are feeling overwhelmed, if you are feeling as if the odds are against you, that is good. Seriously, I am not being cute or smug here. That is good because faith always presupposes that you are being opposed. I want to say this to young people here. One of the things we don't do with our kids is teach them the reality of gap. There will never be a time in their life where they will have everything they need on the one hand to do what they ought to do, and that is when God steps in. There are always forces in your life. My goodness, if I would have listened to the people in my background about who I could be and where I could be and what could happen in my life, I wouldn't be anywhere. So, faith presupposes opposition.

A. W. Tozer, the famed Christian thinker, revivalist, and theologian, was famous for this statement concerning faith. He said:

“Faith is less about what you say you believe
and more about how you behave on a consistent basis.”

That is what biblical faith is all about. As we walk through Hebrews chapter 11 you are going to be amazed. There is the lack of creeds here. There is a lack of articulation and framework about these theological insights. We are going to see people who are in the “verb” position. You are going to see behavior, movement, and how people act.

Let me give you a few general observations about Hebrews chapter 11 before I read the text for the first message here. I am going to make three general observations about this passage, and I would really love for you this week and maybe even this afternoon to read this text. In fact, I want to challenge you to read Hebrews 11 every single day for a week. Actually I want you to read Hebrews 11:1 through chapter 12:3 because that is where the block of thought really ends.

There are three general observations. When you read Hebrews chapter 11 we are very cute in our little moniker. We say this is God's “Hall of Fame.” Well, yes and no. What I want to say here is that these are not the only people who are commended for their faith. These are examples of faith, okay? So, when you read Hebrews chapter 11 don't think that others were excluded; no, later on in the text it says “and others.” These are just examples of men and women who were commended for their faith.

This leads to the second general observation. The word “commend” is used five times in Hebrews 11. I want a little sidebar here because I am going to come back to this all through the series. The exercise of your faith is not about the greatness of you and your faith. It is about the greatness of God. The emphasis in this passage is not just about great faith. The emphasis in this passage is about a great God and so the word “commend” is used five times. The Greek word “commend” is where we get the English transliteration “martyr” from. It is “*martyreo*.” Really that word means to “bear witness.” This is remarkable. I could be on this one for the rest of the message. This is absolutely remarkable. What he is saying throughout Hebrews 11 by the use of this word “commend -- *martyreo*” five times is when we exercise faith [get this] God points us out as models and examples of what pleases Him. That is the reason why He holds up these people in this great hall of fame or hall of faith. When we exercise our faith it is not that we are witnessing to God, but God witnesses for us! God is the witness in Hebrews 11. We are not the witness. God is the witness in Hebrews 11 – *martyreo*. We are commended to God. It is as if He says with a huge smile on His face, “That is my child. Tim believes God. Joe believes God. Brian believes God. Come here. Come here. Come here. That is my child. They believe Me. Look at the stuff they are going through and they are not wavering. They believe Me.”

When I read that I thought of my new favorite commercial. Have you guys seen that commercial with the turtles on the couch? I love that commercial. The baby turtle, and I don't even know what the commercial is about but I just love the turtles, the baby turtle all of a sudden says, "Slow." "Say it again." "Slow." And daddy turtle says, "That is my son." That does not have anything to do with the message, but at any rate... I just love the commercial. God witnesses on our behalf, and that is the way you have to look at Hebrews 11. It is God boasting that His children are giving Him glory despite the mess they are going through. It is unbelievable.

The third big observation in setting this up is that Hebrews 11 is really about motivation. It is really about models that keep moving. When you read the Bible the chapter divisions are there ordinarily to help us, and they do help us, but I want to make an observation here. Every once in awhile the chapter divisions cut off a block of thought. Most scholars believe that the finished thought of Hebrews 11 really is what we have in chapter 12 up to verse 3. That is the point of Hebrews 11. I will read it to you.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,"

Who are those witnesses? -- all the people that he just named in Hebrews chapter 11 -- "and others," so great a cloud of witness."

"let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,
and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,"

The key word is "endurance" there. It says, look, I have just given you these models and examples so that you don't give up, that you don't fail, that you don't cash it in. Then he gives the ultimate example in verse 2. He says:

"looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,
who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
despising the shame,
and is seated on the right hand of the throne of God.
Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself,"

[Here is the main line, the main purpose of Hebrews 11.
I think it is wrapped up in this one purpose clause]

"so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

It is as if God says in Hebrews 11: "All right I will give you all of this. I named these great people. Now I am holding up the LORD Jesus. Who told you that you had the right to quit, Crawford? Who told you that? Who told that you can coast? Who said that you ever had the privilege of doubting God? You just keep moving." Now having said that today I want to talk about the certainty of our future. Hebrews 11 begins with that declaration. It begins with a declaration concerning the certainty of our future. It is as if the writer of Hebrews reaches out and he grabs his readers and he says, "Look I just want you to hear this. I want you to know that your future is indeed certain." Let me read Hebrews chapter 11:1-6. The writer says:

"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.
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.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,
through which he was commended as righteous,
God commending him by accepting his gifts.
And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.
By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death,
and he was not found because God had taken him.
Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.
And without faith it is impossible to please him,
for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists
and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Hebrews 11:1-3; Hebrews 11:6 ESV

Now for the sake of time I am not going to unpack Abel and I am not going to unpack Enoch, although I am going to refer to them. I am going to camp on verse 1-3 and then verse 6. There are two things that I want to say today that really are the pillars of our faith that the writer of Hebrews starts with. The first thing I want to say is found in verses 1-3, and that is that faith is our security. It is our security. The second thing that I want to say from the text is that faith is our ambition. Faith is our security, but it is also our ambition. I will explain that secondly in a moment.

1. OUR SECURITY (11:1-3)

First of all faith is our security. Again, this is very important. Understand that the writer of Hebrews is beginning his discussion with these biographical snapshots of great men and women of God by making a declarative statement. He is saying I don't want you to be afraid of the future. He is saying basically that is sure and it is certain. It is sure and it is certain. If you are constantly worried about tomorrow you are not going to make any appreciable movement today. You will always be paralyzed if you are concerned about what is going to happen to you, where you are going to be, and what is going to take place next. You will be paralyzed. You won't move. You will have panic attacks. You will have all kinds of situations. You will be nervous. You will always be an underachiever as far as God is concerned because the future looms large to you. He begins by saying, "Hey look. No matter what you are going through your faith is your security. It is your security. In verses 1-3 we say this is a definition of faith, but technically this is not a definition of faith. It is a description of what faith does and how it works. That is what Hebrews chapter 11:1-3 is about. It is a description of faith, of what it does, and how it works.

Let me say a word about the word "faith." The Greek word for "faith" is the word "*pistis*." At least that is the one that is used here. Now it means more than just intellectual assent. It means more than just believing something in your head. I want to argue from this text that there is an emotional side of belief in this text. You are going to see this in a few moments when we get to verse 6, that there is an emotional side. There is a personality side. *Pistis* is not just my ability through deduction to agree that believing God is reasonable, although there is nothing wrong with that. There is a place for apologetics. It is that, but it is deeper. The word *pistis* has more to do with a commitment. It is a belief that entrusts, a belief that gives over, a belief that does not question the stability of that upon which I am believing. It really could have been translated "a state of certainty with regard to belief." This is rock solid. So, when we say we have faith, we are not talking about speculation. We are not talking about ambivalence. We are not talking about hope in the sense of wishing – *pistis, pistis*. It is a total commitment of all that I am.

A. A Concrete Faith (v. 1)

There are four descriptive things in these two verses. Hang in there with me concerning this faith. One is that it is a concrete faith. Look at the first part of verse 1. It says:

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,”

It is concrete. It is not speculative. We will get to this down in verse 6. You can't separate verse 6 from verse 1. We will get there in a second, but let me just say this right now. This faith is sure. It is the assurance of things hoped for. It is concrete. Faith is to a Christian what a foundation is to a house. It gives confidence and assurance that it will stand. It is not shaky. It is the assurance. It is the assurance. Joe Rice was sitting in our worship team meeting and had a great observation about this. I had heard this a number of times before years ago, but he just brought it back to mind. The word assurance can really be taken as the title deed for what we are believing God for. The fact that God has placed faith in your heart to believe Him for something is the title deed of His existence. I am going to come back to that in a second.

B. A Certain Faith (v. 1)

Secondly, there is the certainty of faith in verse 1. He says:

““Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
and the conviction of things not seen.”

The word “conviction” there is a Greek word *elegmas*. It means that by which things are proved tested in the sense of persuasion. I am convinced that this is so. I am convinced that this is right. I am believing this not because it is like me going to Las Vegas or buying lottery tickets and all things being considered I have a good possibility to win. No, that is not what he is talking about here. He is talking about something that drives me to action. I am convinced of this and I will stake my life on this. It is the same concept that is found in II Timothy 1:12 when Paul says:

“I am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.”

That persuasion has come by him exercising faith in the past and the confidence that He is going to keep moving. It is that conviction. Part of the problem I have with those of us who want to be all things to the world is we don't want to be distinct or different. I just can't stand the weak posture that we have as Christians. I don't mean to be in your face about what we believe, but if anybody in this culture, if anybody on his job, if anybody in his community ought to be living life with a sense of certainty, it is us. What are you convinced of? Do you know how many Christians' lives have plateaued because there has just been a milk toast attitude? We have elevated reason to the level of idolatry. So the writer begins, and I just want you to know something before we get started because I am going to give illustrations here in chapter 11 and I am going to tell you about this. I want to describe faith as the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. This faith is an intrinsic proof in our hearts that this will be so.

I want to raise the obvious question. “Okay, Crawford, how do I know? How do I know?” How do I know that what I am believing God for is to be believing Him for? Could you be wrong? Yes. You can be wrong. I have to part with about two-thirds of the commentaries that I have read on this text, and many of the guys who I have read on this passage have taught me; and I admire them, but I have to depart from them. A good number of the commentaries will say the only way you can know is if it is written in the Word of God. I say

that is true, but I also say that there are other things because when you come to the word “things” here, it is not just the transcendent statements of God. I also believe that there are things in our lives that are not directly referenced in the Bible that God is calling us to believe Him for having to do with His will in our lives. So, to answer the question is how do we know that we are believing God for the right thing are these three things.

1. It is the Word of God. It is the Word of God. If you are trusting God for something that conflicts with the Word of God, you are on your own, Jack. It is the Word of God.
2. However, in terms of God’s daily will and purpose and plan for our lives, I think secondly that is where the consistency of desire bathed in prayer needs to be looked at. If there is something on your heart that just will not release you, it keeps visiting you, it keeps knocking at you, and the more you pray about it the more it visits you. You need to take a look at that.
3. Thirdly, there is the work and witness of the Holy Spirit in your heart and life. It says, “Crawford, you have to do this.” This was so when I left Campus Crusade for Christ, to come here to be your pastor. I could have stayed there. I didn’t have to go, but there was this consistent throbbing in my heart that this is what God wanted me to do. You move with confidence.

So the presence of faith is the confidence that God will do what He promised and keep His word. Now let me say about the word “things” here. This is the word that pulled me away, and I don't want to say this as the Word of God is everything, but I think it is broader in this text. By the way when you read the snapshot of what these men and women were believing God for it had to do with their initiative and what the Holy Spirit was initiating in their lives. So, he uses the word “things.”

““Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
and the conviction of things not seen.”

The reason I think he uses the word “things” is to emphasize whatever God wants to do in your life. I think there is a bigger issue here. There is a bit of a warning here. I think the subtext here is God is saying, as my dad told me years ago -- and he was pretty passionate about this as I remember him telling me this all the time -- “Son, don't you ever let anybody tell you what you can and cannot be. Don't you let people tell you what you can and cannot be.” There is a little history there. I think it is because he grew up during Jim Crow and everybody was always putting a lid on what an African-American could be or do and this kind of thing and Pop was pretty passionate as he raised his three kids. “Don't you ever let anybody tell you what you can or cannot be.” God determines that. I think it is a little bit of the subtext here when he says “things.” I don't care what it might be. Whatever God wants to do in your life He can pull it off. He can pull it off. I have to say this to us. Be very careful. I know that we take our tests and we listen to our consultants and our counselors and I don't find anything wrong with that and I think we need to take our profiles and take our tests and this kind of thing, but be very careful of typecasting what God can and cannot do in and through your life. “Things hoped for.”

God can do some pretty special things. In fact, every Christian’s mission statement should be to glorify God by believing Him to experience and accomplish everything He has in store for me. I am never going to tell God how to use me. I am never going to tell God what I can and cannot do. My first place to begin is on my face before Him. He is the God of the impossible. I know I am kind of parsing every word here, but notice he says “things hoped for” are in the future. That is the nature of faith. Things not seen. They are visibly not evident, and that is what faith is all about. We don't have faith for something we can measure. We don't have faith for

something we can put our arms around. That is not faith. Our faith is expressed when it is in the future and it is not visible yet. I love what Dr. J. Oswald Sanders says. He says:

“Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.”

C. The Community of Faith (v. 2)

Now also under this stability is the community of faith. He holds this community up. He is going to talk about that in snapshots later on in the passage, but notice what he says in verse 2. He says:

“For by it the people of old received their commendation.”

He is going to give us illustrations of that “commendation – martyreo.” God says “There is my son. It is my daughter that believes me.” What are you trying to say here? I believe that what he is saying to all of us is chill. Look. You are not the only one that ever had to trust God. Faith is the legacy of the people of God. That is our legacy. That is our heritage. It is what we receive and it is what we leave. It is faith. Every people of God, no matter when they lived, the enduring statement they make to the next generation is the fact that they believed God in their generation. It is a legacy of the people of God. Again, as I said, we are not the only ones. By the way the gap between where we are and what God wants us to do is called faith. The people of God embrace that gap. They embrace that gap. I don't have what I need. That is true, but God has everything that I need. That is true. That is true.

D. The Continuity of Faith (v. 3)

There is a continuity of faith in verse 3. He makes a statement about God. He lodges this in history. He says:

“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.”

Now I don't think he is mentioning this for us to get into this whole cosmological argument of order and design and intelligent design. I think that is true, but I don't think that is why he is mentioning this. I think what he is saying is something about the continuity of God – the continuity of God in terms of how He works. What are you trying to say? He is saying look, look, look. Theologically God is all about making the invisible visible. Creation is an illustration of that and that God always works in our lives by making the invisible visible, the invisible visible, the invisible visible, the invisible visible, the invisible visible so we are becoming more like Him, and people see the history of God. That is how He works. God is the God of making the invisible visible. Do you understand me? The fact that you are not where you would like to be, that is no big deal. The world did not exist and He spoke it! God concentrates on that. He makes that happen. So, that is the continuity of our faith.

2. OUR AMBITION (11:6)

A FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD

A. God is Real (v. 6)

Well, there is this security, this stabilizing faith, but secondly he talks about faith being our ambition. He draws a little line in the sand and he uses Abel and he uses Enoch to set this up, and I don't want to get into

that. I just want to land on verse 6 here. Before he proceeds even further he says now wait a minute. "You need to hear this, Crawford. You really need to hear this. What you need to hear is that faith pleases God." He says:

"And without faith it is impossible to please him,
for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists
and that he rewards those who seek him."

II Corinthians 5:9 is this telling verse. Paul says given the urgency of our lives, the fact that we can be gone at any moment, we can either die or be translated out of this world, he underscores what the ambition of every follower of Jesus Christ should be. He says and the English Standard Version interprets it this way:

"and we make it our aim"

Other translations, and I really like this better, say:

"and we make it our ambition to please the LORD."

So, he begs the question. "Do you want to please me, Crawford? Doubt has never pleased me. Duplicity has never pleased me. Do you want to please God? Crawford, I have to tell you this. If you want to please me, if you want to please me, you are going to have to believe Me. Believe Me." By the way he is saying two things I believe I verse 6. He is saying faith is real and faith is always rewarded. Faith is real and faith is always rewarded.

"without faith it is impossible Him
for whoever would draw near to God must believe."

The word "believe" there, and I don't mean to be giving you a Greek lesson this morning, but the tense of this verb is very important. The tense of this verb is not an imperfect tense and it is not a belief that we continue to grow in. That is not the tense here, although there is a side of faith that we need to grow in and I am going to give you seven steps to strengthen your faith and I will click them off in a few moments. There is a side of that which we need to keep growing in. That is true, but you have to understand this. The tense of this verb is the "aorist" tense. What is important about that? It is not a simple past tense; it is a historic decision. It is almost like a crisis. You have to decide that you are going to once and for all historically believe God.

By the way I have found that God uses challenges in my life and consequences in my life for me to make a historic decision. God uses lack in my life for me to make a historic decision. God brings me to crossroads to make a historic decision, and some of you are right there today. You need to make a historic decision. He says if you come to Me, you cannot come to Me wishy-washy. You cannot come to Me doubting Me. You cannot come to Me wondering anything. You are going to have to make your decision if you will believe Me. So, he says that this faith is real. We are not believing fiction. We are believing reality. He says that if you come to God or "draw near to God" you must believe that He exists."

Now when you study your Bible, study words in their context. I used to for a long time read this and say well what he is talking about? God exists. I believe that He is. Yeah, there is a God. There are all these arguments for the existence of God and this kind of thing, but I don't think that is what he is talking about here. I think he might be hinting at that, but when you read this in its context he is saying that you have to believe that God is real and personal, that He is personal. You have to believe that an omnipotent God can be omnipotent in your circumstances. You have to believe that an all-knowing God can be all-knowing in your circumstances. You got to believe that an all-merciful God can be merciful in your circumstances. You have to believe that. So, if

you are going to come to Me, you have to believe that I am real. I am palpable. I am here. I am more real than the air that you breathe. I am more real than the person you are sitting next to. I am more real than your glasses, your hair or lack of hair. I am more real than your jacket. I am there. I am real. Don't come to me if you don't believe that I am real. Faith is not theoretical. Faith is not lodged in theological ideas about God. It is lodged in the reality of our great God. Do you follow me? Do you follow me? You have to believe that. It is the Greek word _____ that He is. He is. He is real. He has everything that we need. He has a purpose and a plan. He cares about every area of our lives

B. God Rewards (v. 6)

You have to come realizing that He is. He is real. You also have to come realizing that he rewards. Look at the verse again:

“without faith it is impossible to please Him
for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists
and that he rewards those who seek him.”

What is the reward here? What is the reward here? Go back to verse 5. Read your Bible in context. This is the reason why he uses Enoch as an illustration. Verse 5 says:

“By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death,
and he was not found because God had taken him.
Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.”

You know the story of Enoch, don't you? Yeah, in Genesis 5:24 Enoch bypassed death. He so pleased God that God drew him into His presence. May I suggest to you that the ultimate reward for our faith is not necessarily just receiving what we are trusting Him for, although I believe that. The ultimate reward for our faith is God Himself. It is God Himself. He is a rewarder of those who seek Him in the sense that when we go to God we go to get Him, to bring Him to the challenges of our faith. That is what He is talking about. I am the One that will reward you. I am the One that will step into Your life. I am the One who will step into that problem in your marriage. I am the One that will step into your bad finances. I am the One who will step into the uncertainty of your future, so we go to get God to bring Him to bridge the gap and we walk over Him to get to where He wants us to be. That is what he is talking about here. It is like a little boy that is over his head. He says, “Look, I need to go get my dad.” So, he says “I am the rewarder of those who seek Me.” He is your reward.

We are going to read later on in this series not everything that you are believing God for will take place in your lifetime, and that is okay. Not everything you are trusting Him for will happen during your lifetime, and that is okay. What this text tells us is the assurance of God because of the nobility of believing Him. That is what it is all about.

Now before I land the plane here and call Tim and the group up I wrestled with doing this. There is a side of me that wanted to give these seven keys of strengthening your faith at the end of the series, but then I thought, no, let me do it at the very beginning. If need be, I will come back to this. Let me just click these off. I am going to give you seven keys to strengthening your faith. You might want to write these down and keep them in your Bible or keep them nearby; because I don't care how long you have walked with the LORD, I get scared. I get overwhelmed. I look at things and I go, “God, how in the world are we going to get out of this mess?” I am there, but these seven things have meant so much to me. They are very simple.

SIX KEYS TO STRENGTHENING YOUR FAITH

1. Accept the reality of opposition

Accept the reality of opposition. I mentioned that earlier. Stop fighting the fact that you have to fight. Newsflash: You are going to be doing that until your last breath. There is always forever going to be stuff coming up against you. We don't live in heaven down here. There is a real devil. There is real stuff in our lives, so accept the reality of opposition.

2. Stand ready to resist

Stand ready to resist. Let me say this as your pastor. Please, although we may be doing this as a mild rebuke to some of us here, some of us listening to me have never been made to hang in there for a while. You have always been bailed out and that is the reason why you are weak today. Stop running. Stop running. Stop ditching. Stand ready to resist – Ephesians chapter 6 – “Put the armor of the LORD on.” I love that little shepherd boy. I put my armor on. I love it. The shield of faith – hold it up. Hold it up. So, the second one is stand ready to resist.

3. Keep your mind focused on and filled with truth

Keep your mind focused and filled with truth. We have to have an intake of this book, the Word of God, so that we think right about our lives, we think right about situations. That fuels our faith -- thinking right and understanding the Word of God.

4. Embrace the growth pains

Embrace the growth pains. What do you mean by that? Well, the condition of our faith is the key indicator of the level of our spiritual maturity. You can tell me all kinds of things. You can be a Bible brain. You can be a theologian. That does not mean anything. At this stage in my life I am not impressed with people who are in umpteen gazillion small groups that read 3,000 commentaries and Christian books and have their theology together, because the one indicator in the Bible of maturity is the condition of your faith and your ability to believe God. That is the key indicator of our maturity. So, just as you don't stop working out because you are sore, you keep pressing into those grown pains. Let God stretch you.

5. Stay in God's presence

Stay in God's presence. Stay in His presence. Keep trusting Him. Keep praying. Keep thinking. Keep believing. Keep dealing with the issues in your own heart, your intimacy with God. Stay in His presence.

6. Associate with "faith-filled" people.

Associate with faith-filled people. I just need to tell you this. Negative critical Christians dismantle the faith of others. Stay away from them. I have to tell you this. I avoid and I don't hang out long with critical negative people. I love them because they are part of the church and this kind of thing but I stay away from them. That will rape you of faith faster than anything else, and if you struggle with a critical spirit and you struggle with negativism I want to encourage you to ask God to really begin to work in your heart.

7. Act.

This is the bottom line. Act. Faith is not for discussion groups. Faith is not for Bible studies. Faith is something you do.

I want to ask you this question today. What step of faith are you taking? What steps of faith are you taking? What are you believing Him for? What are you acting upon? What has He placed on your heart to do? I am going to have you stand and I am going to ask Tim and the team to come up. It is a wonderful closing song. I had never heard it before. Tim sent the words to me the other day. I am going to ask our elders, leaders, and any of our staff who are here this morning to come up front. We want to pray for those of you who are struggling with your faith. Maybe you have a faith challenge. I have to tell you that I go through this myself. Maybe you have a faith challenge. Maybe you are weak in faith and fear has gripped you or there is something that you are just over your head in and you would say, "Crawford, would you guys pray for us?" I am going to slip down and I will be here as Tim and the team sing this song and lead us in the song. We want to pray with you. Don't walk out of here. Sometimes you need the hands and touch and the heart of others to call on the LORD for you when you are bridging a difficult time in your life. So, if that is you, you come.