

# Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

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## Activating Faith

by Dan Trygg

“Now faith is the underlying-reality of things hoped for, the proving-out of what is not seen.”

Hebrews 11:1

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way faith, if it doesn’t have works, is dead by itself.”

James 2:14-17

We have developed such a namby-pamby, shallow perception of what “faith” is in our culture. “Faith” or “belief” has come to be little more than wishful thinking. There is no substance to it beyond the confines of our minds. It has become synonymous with the acceptance of an idea, or agreement with a truth claim. **It has little or no reality in our actions, or in how we live.** We add bits of information to our understanding of reality, but the ramifications of what these things really *should* mean to us is all but lost to us. Our brains are full of trivia *about* biblical stories, or theological concepts, but **not much really affects us enough to initiate or sustain significant change in our day-to-day living patterns.** We are frustrated, because we know and agree with the things the Bible describes, but we do not see God working in our lives as He did in the lives of people recorded in the scriptures. What’s wrong? Why is it not working for *me* like it seems to have been working for *them*? **I think a good part of why we don’t see God at work is because we have lost a correct understanding of what faith is.** The Bible is telling us one thing, but we are interpreting it to mean something entirely different. **We have come to see faith as a passive thing, when, in reality it is a catalyst that activates change.** Faith is much more than mental assent to an idea. If we truly believe something, it will change the direction of our lives.

One of the most well known passages defining faith is Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (NASB), or “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (KJV), or “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (NIV), or “Faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (HCSB) or “Faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see” (NET). You can see **there are interesting differences between translations, but most of them are about “being sure, having assurance or confidence”.** A couple of translations sound a bit peculiar to our ears. What does it mean that “faith is the substance of things hoped for” or “the reality of things hoped for”? How can my inner thoughts be the “substance” or “reality” of something that does not yet exist? We tend to hear the second phrase as “having conviction, evidence, proof, being convinced and assured”, all dealing with my inner confidence that something presented as a hope is actually a sure thing.

**There is no doubt that inner confidence or assurance has something to do with faith, but faith is much more active than that.** In the context, the writer is addressing Hebrew Christians, who were considering giving up their stand for Christ, and returning to simply identifying themselves as Jews. They had come to see that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the prophecies spoken of in the past by God’s spokespeople. Their new understanding was exciting, and they had unashamedly identified themselves as Christ-followers. They became involved in Christian service, assisting other believers in need, and even serving people in prison (Heb. 6:9,10; 10:32-34). As a result, they became the butt of jokes and cruel taunts, they endured afflictions, persecution and suffering at the hands of those who opposed them, even to the confiscation of their property. **The temptation these believers faced was to shrink back to being a “closet Christian”.** It is the same crossroads that Paul wrote about in Romans 12:2, “Don’t be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind toward you to test-out-by-trial-to-discover the will of God.” **There is a tendency, whether through fear of reprisal, or by virtue of other self-interest, to not stand out, ...to not be different from the crowd, ...to not exercise self-control to become spiritually mature, ...to not embrace hardship for the sake of Christ, ...to not step out of your comfort zone in order to pursue the will of God for your life.** This is the faith dilemma we all must face: **Will we be among those who shrink back, or those who endure?**

What are the first three principles of good Bible interpretation? Context, context and context!! **Hebrews 11:1 is often approached as an isolated verse, or in light of the following context, but it is not often considered in light of the context that precedes it.** This is one example where the chapter divisions, which were added centuries later, tend to obscure the flow of thought. **When you look at the end of chapter 10, you find the dilemma I just described above.** After reminding them how they had joyfully endured suffering in the past, the writer reminds them, “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence (boldness, freedom-in-speaking-out), which has a great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you have need of endurance, so that *when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.* <sup>37</sup> For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. <sup>38</sup> But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he

shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.<sup>39</sup> But we are *not* of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.<sup>11:1</sup> Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.<sup>2</sup> For by it the people of old gained approval” (Heb 10:35-11:2). So, then, **the context is about either shrinking back into oblivion and ruin, or of pressing forward to do the will of God by faith.**

Now we can look more closely at the unusual language used in 11:1. In the first phrase, we have “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” in the NASB. The word for “assurance” is the Greek word, *hupostasis*. It is a fairly common Greek word, used in a variety of settings. It literally means “setting under” or “stand under”. It can refer to a foundation or substructure that one builds upon, or it can metaphorically refer to the firmness of that underlying structure (hence, “confidence” or “assurance”), or it can refer to that which is the essential nature, the underlying essence of something. If we put this in context, **faith is the foundation, or under-girding, of hoped-for things.** We often make the mistake of seeing the second phrase, “the conviction of things not seen”, as an entirely new statement about faith, but it is not. It is a further clarification of faith, meant to balance out or complement the first phrase. The word translated as “conviction” literally refers to the “trying or testing in order to prove” or “the act of bringing something to light”. So, *while faith is the firm-undergirding of hoped for things, it is also that which brings the invisible things to visibility through testing, trial and examination.* Faith is *not* just an intellectual notion. It is also a quest, an investigation in pursuit of the promise or hope it is fixed on.

When you see these two ideas side-by-side in this verse, then the remainder of Hebrews 11 flows naturally out from this statement. The next verse is translated as “For by it the people of old gained approval.” This is not what the Greek says. It literally says that they “were testified” or “they were borne witness”. What? What the writer is saying is **this is the characteristic that the Bible heroes all had. They all acted in faith.** The ten people catalogued in the next 30 verses, all put their faith to the test. They *did* something because they believed. **Belief was never just a set of ideas divorced from life choices. The point of the passage is that because of faith, they acted.** Again, in the brief reference to people of faith in the next seven verses, the emphasis is on how **what they did showed their faith. Faith instigates action.** Verse 39 summarized the point, though the same erroneous translation rendering as in verse 2 obscures it, “and all these, being testified by means of the faith...” In other words, it was testified about them that they were people of faith. **Many of them did not receive the promise they were hoping for.** It was to remain for a time that came after their lifetime. **Many of them also experienced hardship, ridicule and persecution because they refused to shrink back and “get in line” with everyone else. Why did they do this? Because they believed in the promises of God above all else.** This faith became an understructure for them to build on in pursuit of the promises, visions and hopes God had revealed to them. It also became the motivator for them to test, probe, stretch and pursue these hopes. *Others could see* the changes in behavior, the investments of their time and energy toward the things not seen, and they testified that they were people of faith. **Faith is not a static set of ideas; it is a pursuit. No one can testify about your faith, unless it is visible in your actions.**

This is neatly summarized for us in verse 6, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one coming to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him”. The undergirding aspect of faith is that God exists and rewards those who seek Him out. The testing-out part of the faith would be the motivation to *actually* pursue God, to *invest* time and attention to learn about Him and to draw near to Him. **Faith is not just knowing that God exists. That won’t do it.** In James 2:19 the brother of Jesus wrote, “You believe God is one? You do well. The demons also believe, ...and shudder!” **It is not enough to know about God. There must be a level of faith that instigates action, or the truth is only empty, meaningless information in your head.** It is entirely unprofitable and unproductive in your life. **Until you move from mental assent to practical action, you do not have genuine faith.**

One final example, also from James, “**What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?**”<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you don’t give them what the body needs, what good is it?<sup>17</sup> In the same way faith, if it doesn’t have works, is dead by itself.” (Jas. 2:14-17). **What good is it, indeed?! The so-called faith of this person does nothing to promote change in him or herself, and it does not result in any practical outworking of assistance for the person in need.** From Hebrews 10, we saw that *the real issue is doing the will of God.* “You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you might receive what was promised” (vs. 36). **There is a path of less resistance that leads away to destruction, and the ruin of your life** (Matt. 7:13; Mark 8:35). Think also of Mordecai’s words to Esther, “For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise... from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish” (Est 4:14). **If we shrink back, we ruin the intended plan of God for our lives.** Not only do we *not* do His will, we never become what we could. **Instead of discovering and preserving the life and purpose God intended for us, we shrink back into the namelessness of unbelief.** It would, then, *not* be testified of us that we are people of faith. What will others say about you?