

Key Principles of Christian Living

5. God Responds to Faith

Let's begin by reviewing the first four key principles of the Christian life:

1. He's God and We're Not.

Get this and you have a firm foundation to build upon. Fail to grasp this truth and nothing else will ever work!

2. God Doesn't Need Us - But We Desperately Need God

A really humbling truth, but a vitally important one. God does everything for us out of love, He is complete without us. He needs nothing from us. But without God, we don't even clear the starting gate in the race of life! We are hopeless and helpless.

3. God's Bidding is God's Enabling

Whatever God asks of us, God provides the means and the power to fulfill. He never calls us to be or do what He does not empower and make possible in us.

4. What We Seek, We Find

Basically, we have as much of God and His gifts and His power and His presence as we truly want. If we seek God with all our heart, we will always find Him.

Each of these four principles cover a major area of our relationship with God and leads us to a personal response. Now the fifth principle moves us into a new area: **God Responds to Faith**. Faith is one of the most prominent words in Christianity. Sometimes the word refers to an entire belief system, such as 'the Christian faith' or 'the Islamic faith' or 'the Jewish faith'. In other contexts, it refers to a body of doctrine, as in 'Keep the faith.'

But mostly faith refers to our personal response to God. The 'faith' of this fifth principle is not a religion or a set of doctrines, but rather our daily, moment-by-moment trust in God. When our faith is active, it releases the reality of Christ in us and through us.

Now in Hebrews 11:6 in most translations it says that "*without faith it is impossible to please God.*" This is one of those verses in the Bible that I really wish had never been written – not like this anyway. When it is read in context with the whole gospel, I don't have a problem with it at all. However, on its own, which sadly is how it's quoted 99% of the time, it has too often become fuel for the performance-based religion which God hates with a passion.

This whole notion of 'pleasing God' is so misunderstood by fallen humans like us. As soon as we come into this world we are programmed to do more and try harder to please our parents, our school teachers, our friends, our employers, our pastor and our fellow Christians. We want people to be happy with us and our performance. So, we read a verse like this, and we instinctively try and treat God the same way we treat the humans around us. But it doesn't work! It never will and that's not what this verse really means anyway.

The trouble is, that's exactly what it says and from that we interpret: *the more faith I have, the more pleased God will be with me*. The only way you could believe that is if you have failed to truly understand the gospel at all!

“Without faith it is impossible to please God” is one of those *“the sun rises in the east”* statements in Scripture. That is what *appears* to happen, but the reality is very different. The sun does not rise anywhere, does it? No, the earth is what moves in relation to the sun - but it *appears* the sun rises in the east. So Hebrew 11:6 simply means that without faith you will never fully embrace and know God. No matter how religious you may be, if you do not have faith, you cannot experience the fullness of God in Christ.

The fact is, God cannot ever be ‘pleased’ with you outside of Christ. Nothing you do will ever be good enough to please God. You are sinful, fallen and alienated from God and you can stack performance upon performance and not come close to pleasing God – not in a million lifetimes! So, brace yourself for the good news now: Are you ready? Here is the Truth:

God is already pleased with you IN CHRIST

If you are in Christ, then God is 100% pleased with you because of the perfect performance of Jesus against God’s holy law – which has been credited to you as righteousness – and its a free gift from God. So, the only way you can truly enter into God’s pleasure is to have faith in the finished work of Christ in you. I so wish the writer of Hebrews had said that here, so millions of people could not take this verse out of context and kick the guts out of the gospel!

In my opinion, Hebrews 11:6 should read: *“Without faith in the finished work of Christ in you, it is impossible to truly know God, Who is pleased with you.”*

Through faith in Christ, we respond to and encounter God. You can be baptized, go to church, give money, attend Sunday School, read your Bible, fast and pray, sing in the choir, lead a ministry or even become a Pastor or missionary ... but if you don’t have faith in Christ Who is in you, you will not embrace the power and reality of the kingdom of heaven – you will not truly experience God.

Faith is not a one-time experience when we first come to Christ. It is a moment-by-moment attitude, an orientation, a lifestyle. The same faith we exercise to believe and receive the grace of God and our salvation in Christ, is the faith which carries us from day to day as we journey deeper into the kingdom of heaven. That’s why the Bible says, *“The righteous shall live by faith,”* and in Romans 1:17 we read that the gospel reveals a righteousness that is *“by faith from first to last.”*

The whole Christian life is a life of faith. We embrace our salvation by faith, we are kept by faith, we walk by faith, endure by faith, rejoice by faith, serve by faith, love by faith, sacrifice by faith, pray by faith, worship by faith, and we obey by faith.

So, what is faith? Well in the Bible there’s no clearer instruction on faith than Hebrews 11. Most of us know this as the ‘Faith Hall of Fame.’ Here we have a list of Old Testament heroes, most of them introduced with the phrase “by faith.”

By faith Abel (v. 4).

By faith Enoch (v. 5).

By faith Noah (v. 7).

By faith Abraham (v. 8).

By faith Isaac (v. 20).

By faith Jacob (v. 21).

By faith Joseph (v. 22).

By faith Moses’ parents (v. 23).

By faith Moses (v. 24).

By faith the people (v. 29).

By faith the walls of Jericho fell (v. 30).

By faith Rahab the prostitute (v. 31).

And the writer says he doesn’t even have time to mention the individual exploits of *“Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets.”* (Hebrews 11:32).

They and all the other heroes of the faith are summarized in this fashion:

Hebrews 11:33-35a *“Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”*

That’s a wonderful list and we can all think of the great biblical heroes who did these things. But that is only part of the story:

Hebrews 11:35b-38 *“Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated - the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”*

Who are these poor, unenlightened souls? What have they done to deserve such punishment? The writer simply calls them “others.” They are “others” who lived by faith. These men and women who endured such torment were living by faith just as much as Noah, Abraham, Moses or Joshua. Their faith was not weaker. If anything, their faith was stronger because it enabled them to endure incredible suffering. They are not “lesser” saints because they found no miracle. If anything, they are “greater” saints because they were faithful even when things didn’t work out right. Verse 39 then gives us a summary statement of the whole list:

Hebrews 11:39 *“These were all commended for their faith.”*

As we stand back and study this list, three factors quickly emerge. First of all, though these individuals are widely separated by time and space (and by personality and individual achievement), they are joined by one common factor: What they did, they did by faith in God.

Secondly, living by faith often meant moving against the prevailing tide of public opinion. Noah built an ark, Abraham left Ur, Moses rejected the wealth of Egypt, and Joshua marched around Jericho like an idiot. The same principle holds true today. If you decide to live by faith, you will definitely stand out from the crowd, and you may face opposition and ridicule.

Thirdly, Hebrews 11 demonstrates that the life of faith is not supposed to be a rare gem. It’s easy to look at Enoch or Noah or Joseph or Moses or David and say, *“I could never do that.”* Down deep in our hearts, we have believed a lie that the life of faith is restricted to a few ‘special’ people. We think we could never qualify to have our names added to the Hebrews hall of fame. But that’s the very reason this chapter is in the Bible, so that we would know that these are ordinary men and women who did extraordinary things simply because they had faith in and extraordinary God. They are made of the same stuff as us. The life of faith is within the reach of every believer because faith is a gift from God – freely given to everyone who wants it. You don’t have to be special, talented or particularly bright ... you just have to believe and receive. That’s the way you get anything and everything from God – **believe and receive** – it’s all by faith.

Hebrews 11:1 offers us a concise definition of faith: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.”* I personally prefer the traditional rendering because it is more picturesque: *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* The word ‘substance’ is an unusual word that refers to the ‘essential nature’ of things. It was sometimes used of the foundation of a house and beyond the New Testament it was used for the title deed to a piece of property. So, faith is the “title deed” to things hoped for, things promised by the Lord. It is the confident assurance that what we hope for will someday come to pass.

The word 'evidence' refers to legal proof in a courtroom. So, faith is proof to the soul that enables us to see things that cannot be seen by the naked eye. Through the eyes of faith, we 'see' what would otherwise be invisible.

Now there's a sense in which living by faith requires a measure of holy discontent. Not human discontent, which is always self-focused, but holy discontent which is God-focused. You've got to want something that you don't have in order to have faith because faith always deals with things 'hoped for.' If you've already got everything you need, want or desire; and if for you all the promises of God have already come true, and if you've reached a state of spiritual perfection; if all your prayers have been answered and if all your loved ones are saved and serving the Lord; if there is no lack anywhere in any area that you can see, then you don't need faith because you're living fully in heaven already and you just don't realize it. If you are completely satisfied with your life and the world around you, then you can skip this sermon altogether because it doesn't apply to you.

But as long as we still have sick people, lonely people and damaged people; as long as marriages keep breaking up, and children suffer; and as long as the killing continues, and our leaders disappoint us; and as long as there is hatred and violence and prejudice and all manner of evil in the world - we will need faith because the "things hoped for" have not yet come to pass.

What, then, is faith? Think about these three words: **Believe, See, Do.**

- > Faith believes what others do not believe.
- > Faith sees what others do not see.
- > Faith does what others do not do.

True faith is never passive. True faith moves us to act, to do, to try, to build, to attempt, to expand, to say "no" to sin and "yes" to righteousness, to join, to speak out, to move forward, to dare to dream beyond our means, and to walk around Jericho again and again no matter how stupid we look or feel until finally "*those walls come tumbling down.*" That's faith!

I once heard someone say that faith is 'outrageous trust in God.' I like that a lot. 'Outrageous trust' is what you have when you build an ark hundreds of miles from any body of water. 'Outrageous trust' compels you to leave your home not knowing where you are going because some unknown God spoke to you. And 'outrageous trust' sends you into the Elah Valley to face Goliath with nothing but a slingshot and some stones. Have you ever been in a situation where you needed an 'outrageous trust' in God?

Let's pause for a moment and take a closer look at the case of Moses. The heart of his story is found in Hebrews 11:24-27. Consider Moses, who could have become Pharaoh one day but by faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he "*saw Him who is invisible.*" He found the strength to persevere and endure 40 years in Midian because he "*saw him who is invisible.*"

Moses gave up the riches of Egypt in order to join the motley band of Hebrews who were so hated by the Egyptians. And he found the strength to endure the persecution because he "*saw Him who is invisible.*" That's one of the most remarkable and revealing statements in the entire Bible.

How do you "see" an invisible person? God was invisible and yet Moses "saw" him. How? "*By faith.*" Moses had faith which gave him spiritual sight. And he saw the God who is invisible. The Egyptians didn't see. But Moses did. That's what faith can do. What exactly did Moses see? The text says he was "*looking ahead*" to his reward. Moses knew there were two worlds and he could choose to live by the values of either one. There was the world he could see, the world of Egypt, the world of the senses, the world of money, power, sex, pleasure, fame, self-gratification, the world of military power and brute force.

Then there was (and is) another world. That's the invisible world of the spirit, the realm of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, the angels and the saints. It's a world that is ruled by righteousness and entered only by grace, and embraced only by faith.

Now here's the kicker: Those who live for this world will have the reward of this world when they die, all that they lived for will die with them. They will be buried or incinerated and have nothing substantial to show for their time on planet earth. But those who live in this world but also embrace the eternal kingdom of heaven, have an entirely different experience. Like Moses, they may suffer in the short-term but they will enter into "the joy of the Lord." And those who live in this earthly kingdom by the values of the kingdom of Heaven will have deeper joy and greater satisfaction even while they are rejected and ridiculed by those around them. Somehow Moses saw all of this. He figured out that it wasn't worth it to live for Egypt. For Moses, there was only one choice. He would suffer with the people of God. End of discussion.

So, the question is, in which world do you want to make your mark? If you want to make it big here in 'Egypt', good luck. Go for it. You will have your reward, and you won't be happy when you get it. If you want to live for the kingdom of God, you can, but it might cost you something in the meantime.

Now there is so much more I could say about faith, but we need to move on to other key principles so I will leave it there for now. However, just in case the spirit of legalism wants to invade your head while you are pondering the issue of faith, let me emphasize four things about faith.

- Faith is a gift from God.
- The object of our faith is God.
- Faith is not a task, a duty, a work, a requirement, or a discipline.
- **Faith is the moment-by-moment orientation of our heart towards God.**

With that understanding of faith, I want you to read Hebrews chapter 11 a couple more times this week. As you do, remember this: the same gift of faith bestowed upon those 'heroes of faith' you are reading about is being held out to you today, and every day by God.

If you want to experience the fullness of the kingdom of Heaven and see the life of Christ within you transform your thinking, feeling and living ... then I encourage you to accept that gift from God and keep on accepting it day after day after day. For without faith, you will miss so much of what God is waiting to do in you, through you and through His Church.

Let those who have ears to hear ... listen to what the Spirit is saying today.