

This is what the ancients were commended for (Hebrews 11:2)

Since July 1996, I have prepared my Sunday sermons and Bible studies on the computer

- Not long after that my computer was connected to the internet and soon after high-speed broadband
- While I am sure that there is a lot of rubbish on the internet, its availability has changed my preparation
- Because whereas I always tried to get my facts right – now everything can be easily checked
- And so everything is best checked by me before someone else queries something
- That's the good news! The bad news is the easy availability of the internet is a good displacement activity
- Which according to the readily available definition on the internet (only *Wikipedia* if you need to know)
- Is 'a high motivation for two or more conflicting behaviours' – often involving actions bringing comfort
- So before I began writing this sermon, I just checked the football news on a fans' website
- And read a thread (a series of supporter comments) about the 10 best players in the last 10 years

But now to Hebrews - one of the more difficult books in the New Testament and one of the longer letters

- Because it is one of the longer and more difficult New Testament books, it is easily avoided
- Chapter 11 is undoubtedly the most famous chapter from the book – so we are going to have a look at it

Which brings me back to my earlier thoughts about the 10 best players in the last 10 years

- I am not suggesting for one moment that this is a displacement activity for the writer to the Hebrews
- This is clearly an important part of his work – but 11:2, 'this is what the ancients were commended for'
- And 11:39 'these were all commended for their faith' bracket a prodigious list of great believers
- Which starts in quite some detail with Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham
- Continues with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses and even mentions Rahab from Jericho

As if he realises that he cannot continue in so much detail – continues with a quick list of names

- Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel
- Before, as if being overwhelmed at the immensity of the task, the writer breaks off into a narrative
- Of the exploits and sufferings of an unnamed host of believers, ‘a great cloud of witnesses’ (Heb. 12:1)

It seems that one of the things facing the Christians who first read the letter to the Hebrews

- Is that they had seen many of their friends fall away from Christian faith
- The Christians who remained in the church were discouraged – had they made a mistake by staying?
- Knowing this, the writer does not want them to shrink back (Heb. 10:39)
- Instead with a blend of solemn warning and tender encouragement, he exhorts them to keep going
- And in order to do so, he lists not the top 10 believers from the last 10 years
- But what really amounts to a small selection from a great crowd of believers, as it were, urging them on
- While the chapter is a classic summary of faith – it is not primarily about heroes of the faith
- The focus is not really on the greatness of their faith but the greatness of their God
- It was not through having great faith that they came to know God
- but through knowing God that they came to have great faith – their God is our God

I must make mention that I borrowed the three points from Baptist minister, Bible teacher, Raymond Brown

- who was principal of Spurgeon’s College, London, and not the American RC scholar of the same name
- these points are not intended to be a definition of faith – they are characteristics rather than a definition
- in the Bible ‘faith’ has shades of meaning – sometimes indicating the way we believe ‘in Jesus’
- rather than what we believe. It can mean intellectual assent or deep personal commitment
- those with true faith accept God’s word, win his approval and recognize his power.

I FAITH ACCEPTS GOD'S WORD

'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (Heb. 11:1)

- Raymond Brown helpfully comments, 'faith is man's response to what God has said.
- It takes seriously the message of God's revealed truth in Holy Scripture.
- It does not merely agree with God's word, but acts upon it.' Faith accepts what cannot be seen.

In the autumn of 1983, I had my first of many church council meetings (I reckon I have now had over 150)

- At my first church council, we had a discussion about providing Bible in the pews
- Happily the church council agreed to do so and because they wanted NIV I have used it ever since
- At first it was hard to get the door stewards to give them out, then to get the people to pick them up
- But, as you know, getting the Bible in your hands is but the first step to getting the Bible in your heart

We have to consider the way in which God speaks to us – the Bible accepts that he speaks through nature

- 'The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Psalm 19:1)
- And prophets, 'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets (Hebrews 1:1)
- But, of course, God has spoken supremely in Jesus Christ his Son (Hebrews 1:2)
- The written record of God speaking is in the Holy Scriptures which are God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16)
- The canon or standard of the Christian Bible was established and affirmed as God's Holy Word

A great preacher of the last century, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones was asked for a definition of faith

- After some thought he replied, 'Believing God' – Abraham believed God: he accepted his word
- In the story of the Garden of Eden, it was when Eve succumbed to the tempter, 'Did God really say?'
- That doubt, disobedience and death entered her experience

II FAITH WINS GOD'S APPROVAL

It is accepting God's word, even though what God has promised is not yet seen, that wins God's approval

- Abram believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6)
- Not surprisingly it is the story of Abraham that receives most attention in this chapter
- It was by exercising faith in God's word that the men (and women), 'the ancients' gained God's approval
- The word translated 'ancients' is the same word that we use to translate elder/minister/presbyter
- God held before them a vision, normally a word of promise, and they trusted in those promises

For Abraham the promise was to be the father of a great nation, with its own people and land

- At the time it was all unseen and, to be realistic, did not seem all that likely
- Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were already past child-bearing age so sons and heirs were impossible
- But the lesson learned was that nothing is impossible with God

Amid the tea-towels, dressing gowns and tinsel of the traditional children's nativity play

- We ought not to miss the great faith and obedience of Mary, probably a teenage peasant girl
- When the angel appeared to her and told her that she would bear a child, a son, the Son of God
- She replied, 'I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said' (Luke 2:38)
- Such faith won God's approval, 'from now on all generations will call be blessed
- For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name' (Luke 2:48-49)
- It is by faith that we please God (Heb. 11:6) – the heart of the believer is not set upon pleasing self
- But upon pleasing God. Human approval is unimportant to the believer compared with pleasing God

III FAITH RECOGNIZES GOD'S POWER

As I was getting into the car for my best man to take me to the wedding ceremony, he said to me:

- 'Don't wear your jacket in the car it will crease and people will see your back for most of the service'
- I took his advice and, certainly when travelling to Sunday services, have followed his advice ever since
- Recently, as I was putting on the minister's dog-collar and my jacket beside the car in a car park
- A passer-by said, 'I have never seen that done before,' so, just for him I did it again
- And after a bright conversation, I gave him a church postcard, something I have tried to do since 1990
- When I first had some full-colour publicity done for my churches – my space was limited to 100 words
- But the fewer words I had the better it looked and in the end I settled for 86 words

The God who made the universe loves us yet our relationship with him has been broken by our unbelief and disobedience. Through Jesus Christ, his Son, God came to seek after us and to save us. Jesus died for our sins, has risen from the dead and is calling us now to follow him. He offers forgiveness for the past, new life for the present and hope for the future. With our grateful thanks we offer God our worship and service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Not long after I prepared what were at first bookmarks (now postcards) I had a letter – did I really believe

- 'The God who made the universe'? That was too much for the letter-writer but not for the Hebrews-writer
- By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command
- So that what is seen was not made out of what was visible
- When we accept that the visible came forth from the invisible by God's power we exercise faith
- F. F. Bruce comments, 'the first chapter of Genesis is probably uppermost in his mind,
- since he is about to trace seven living examples of faith from the subsequent chapters of that book'

This great chapter in Hebrews illustrates the continuity between the Hebrew Christians and earlier men of faith

- the thing they had in common was that they believed God, they trusted in his promises
- for the ancients it was promises in things that were to come, including the seed of Abraham, Son of David
- the coming Christ, the Messiah – the coming Christ – revealed in person in the Lord Jesus Christ
- for Christians since his life, death and resurrection, it is faith in the Christ who has come
- in both the pre-Christian and Christian eras it is believing in the Creator-God, who spoke and it was so
- but as the writer's exposition unfolds, we find that this saving faith that does not shrink back (Heb. 10:39)
- is faith in action – these men and pedantically from the chapter we would have to say 'woman' of old
- but in reality we know that it is men and women of old, they did not win God's approval by what they did
- they won God's approval by what they believed, what they did was just what they believed *in action*

Acceptance of a special creative act of God is possible only by faith

- but acceptance of a special saving act of God is possible only by faith too
- that special saving act of God being, preposterously, the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross
- while the resurrection is God's seal of victory, it is his seal of victory upon the blood shed on the cross
- it is this faith that is the basis, the substructure of all that Christian life means and all we hope for

But faith is a present reality, not exclusively the property of past heroes

- it gives us convictions about God's power in creation, about God's power in salvation
- God's people must be people of faith—even in the face of disheartening difficulties
- It is this life that accepts God's word, that wins God's approval, that recognizes God's power
- That is the only life that pleases God – what matters is where we place our trust and on what grounds
- Because we have the same God, we can persevere – but how do we do that? By faith!