

The Objective Nature of Faith (Heb. 11.1)

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**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 received their commendation. <sup>3</sup> 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.**

Introduction

Our text (Heb. 11.1) tells us what faith is, but it is not in an exhaustive way. The explanation is limited to the purpose of the author in this context. He is continuing his encouragement to keep the faith that comes on the heels of the serious warning that ended chapter 10 (v. 35, **Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward**, v. 39, **But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls**). Some in the confessing church may throw in the towel and give up the fight. Moreover, all of us face times when we feel like giving up, times when we feel like quitting. His encouragement to keep the faith ended with the fact that true saints (most in the confessing church) have faith to the preserving of their lives without destruction, body and soul forever.

Still, because the battles with sin within and the world without are often difficult to endure, the pastor continues to encourage the church by giving a grand account of faith. He *elevates his encouragement tenfold* by giving the church then and now this great faith chapter, Hebrews 11. It is often called not the hall of fame but the hall of faith containing a cavalcade (procession, succession, or series) of OT examples of faith. Thus, he elevates his rhetoric exponentially to encourage us in our walk in faith, as Hagner expresses it: “The author’s purpose in this magnificent section of his letter is to encourage his readers to emulate these heroes and heroines of faith, who on the basis of what they knew about God and his promises had the courage to move out into the unknown, with their hearts set upon, and their lives controlled by, a great unseen reality...The list...is meant to provide the reader with strength and encouragement in their own difficult circumstances” (*Hebrews* 179).

Coming now to the opening verse of this famous chapter, we find a description of faith. In particular, we have two points regarding this title, “The Objective Nature of Faith”: a) faith in relation to things promised, and b) faith in relation to things invisible. These points interrelate and both unpack the objective nature of faith.

1A. Faith in relation to things promised

Hebrews 11.1 is “deceptively simple” (Hughes 438; he presents four distinct ways to interpret the word “assurance” in 11.1a). There is much more here than what first meets the eye. If we compare translations (the ESV and the KJV), we can immediately get some idea of the complexity of the passage:

ESV: **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

KJV: **Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.**

Note how the translations match exactly except for the KJV use of *substance* versus *assurance* in 11.1a and *evidence* versus *conviction* in 11.1b. We have to work on and resolve this difference. But things are not all bad. The possible complexity of the text carries with it the promise of a rich explanation of faith.

In 11.1a, a bond between faith and hope is implicit; faith is tied to **things hoped for**. Faith is inseparable from hope, but notice that the relationship is not that of faith to hope. Instead, the connection is between faith and the things that make up the objects of our hope. Thus, the text says, “faith is the assurance/substance of those things upon which we set our hope.”

What we hope for are the promises of God that pertain to the future. This part of the verse puts faith in relation to things promised. Some of the things hoped for are the great promises of

eternal Sabbath rest and an indestructible resurrection life like our Lord's. Furthermore, the future is every step of our journey still in front of us that takes us to the grand finale of history in eternal Sabbath rest. God promises us many good things for the days ahead. He promises to be faithful, to never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13.5), to sanctify us as His covenant children, and, in terms of the covenant with Jacob, He promises to be with us while the details of the covenant remain yet unfulfilled: **Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you** (Gen. 28.15). He covenants to be our helper so that we have no need to fear what man may do to us (Heb. 13.6). Accordingly, children of the eternal covenant have been perfected and sanctified with Christ on the cross (Heb. 10.10), are being sanctified (Heb. 10.14), and will be sanctified in the realization of heaven's perfection (Heb. 9.12; Rom. 8.30; 1 Cor. 1.8-9).

In review so far: we have noted a) that the particular relationship of faith here is not to hope, as such (though that is implied), but to the promises upon which our hope rests. b) Then, we took note of the fact that hope looks to the future and the future has two broad subdivisions. The future includes both the grand finale of entry into eternal rest and the day by day journey of the Christian walk.

Now we need to focus our attention on the word in 11.1a that expresses the relationship of faith to the promises of the future out in front of us from here to glory: the word is either substance or confidence. We are back to the problem. This word occurs two other times in the book of Hebrews. In the first occurrence (Heb. 1.3), the translators use "nature" in the sense of essence or substance (**He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature** [His substance, essence, or essential make up]). In the second (Heb. 3.14), it means assurance or confidence: **For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence [assurance] firm to the end.**

Can we find a solution to the translation in Hebrews 11.1a without getting overly complicated? It seems that we can if we do two things: a) grasp the distinction between the subjectivity and objectivity of faith, and b) follow the context on the use of faith throughout the chapter.

Regarding the distinction between the subjectivity and objectivity of faith, it is helpful to think about something inward in contrast to something outward. Subjectively speaking, faith is an inner sense of certainty. Thus, the use of "assurance" emphasizes the subjective dimension of faith as confident trusting in the heart. Objectively speaking, faith is something public; it is outward action. This is what is meant by the obedience of faith. Inner confidence produces outward obedience. Thus, we appropriately sing: "trust and obey" to describe the inward and outward nature of faith. This will help us solve the translation question. Now let us turn to the context.

Regarding the context, it should be obvious to us all that the subjective dimension of faith is not what the author emphasizes. How can we say that assurance or being sure in the heart is not the emphasis of Hebrews 11? We can say this because all of the references to faith in this famous "faith" chapter speak of faith in action. Most of the time, these references speak of the obedient acts of faith that characterized the lives of the faithful, the faith filled OT saints. Some examples are: by faith Abel offered a better offering (v. 4) by faith Noah built the ark (v. 7), by faith Abraham obeyed (v. 8), and by faith the people crossed the Red Sea (v. 29). Of course, these saints did these things because they had an inner confidence; that is presupposed, but the accent is on the outward actions of faith.

Therefore, we should follow the KJV that uses the more cumbersome and less intuitive word substance (or essence): **Now faith is the substance of things hoped for.** We have to think objectively about this opening verse that sets the stage for the entire chapter. This is more difficult to do but the reward for doing it is great.

So, now, let us venture down the objectivity road.

The question that immediately surfaces is this: how can faith be one in substance or essence with God's promises regarding the future, both as a process and as a final destination? How can faith be the substance/essence of things hoped for? What does this mean? Here is a straightforward answer: it means that faith is also a promise; it is also something hoped for, expected, and anticipated. This leads to two important implications.

1) Faith being inseparably a promise is God's gift

Since faith is one in essence with what is promised, it must itself be a promise. It does not just embrace the promises; it is itself something promised to us for the days yet to come.

This presupposes that it is God's gift to us at every step of our journey. This text has us look ahead and understand that faith is something we have because of God's faithfulness to His promise. By that we must understand that our faith must become ours by His gift. That is what He is telling us: this is my gift to you; I promise it to you, it is certain that you will have it. As we venture into the future and look back to our endurance in the past (as he directed us in 10.32-35), likewise, we are to look ahead and know that not only are we to embrace the promises by faith, but we are also to fix it in our hearts that our faith is the gift of His promise to which He is faithful.

2) Faith is inseparably the means of access into all of God's gifts

There is another sense in which faith is one in essence with the things hoped for. It is one with all of the things that God promises as the means by which we receive the things promised. That fact is also an emphasis throughout this chapter. Faith is not only obedient, but it is also the way to access God's blessing. Some examples are: by faith Sarah conceived in her old age (v. 11), by faith Abraham received Isaac back from being as good as dead (v. 19), by faith Rahab did not perish (v. 31), and by faith the saints of old conquered kingdoms (v. 33).

This is teaching similar to Paul's word about faith as the gift of God: **<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them** (Eph. 2.8-10). In the discussion of this text, it has become clear that **the gift of God** (v. 8c) refers to being **saved through faith** (v. 8.a). A good illustration is that of a house with a door. The house represents the gift of salvation by faith. The door of the house is faith. Thus, faith is both the gift of God's giving us salvation, and it is the door to all the blessings of the salvation God gives. Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews gives the huge encouragement that faith is both God's gift and it is the doorway of access into the holy of holies. Genuine believers have an active faith that enters boldly into the presence of God through Christ.

The thrust of all this emphasis by the writer of Hebrews on the objective nature of faith is the encouragement that it gives *to strengthen our confidence and assurance* and *to prompt us forward to the active faith* that God intends for us because, as Paul put it, **we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them** (Eph. 2.10).

## 2A. Faith in relation to things invisible

We have a bit more information about the objective nature of faith in 11.1b that speaks of faith as the evidence or proof of things not seen (KJV: **Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen**). Again, translations that have "conviction" (ESV) are reflecting a misplaced emphasis on the subjective side of faith. Inner faith in its outward manifestation, in its actions that express the depth of its conviction, is evidence that convinces. Being convinced and having conviction is presupposed but the accent is on faith as evidence or proof.

Per the first half of the text, because faith is one in essence with future promises it must itself be a promise; it does not just embrace the promises, it is itself something promised to us for the days yet to come. Thus, as part of what is promised, the faith we now possess is the beginning of our realization of the promises (as part of them and one of them). Therefore, it is a guarantee of the certainty of what is yet to come. Having one of the promises now guarantees the

realization of the rest of the promises; it is like a title that God gives us that seals and promises His intention for us in the future. It *is* proof. (It is not “prove it to me so I will have faith”; having faith is proof; not “seek understanding so you can believe” but faith seeks understanding). Thus, by having faith in our hearts, a faith that works and obeys (as we look back and venture forward) and by knowing that a working faith is promised to us as an abiding faith across the journey to the glory, we have the proof from our Lord that God not only exists but that He exists with immutable faithfulness to His promises.

## Conclusion

### 1) The works of faith (working faith; faith that works)

This verse sets the tone for the entire passage regarding the workings of faith. Clearly, the emphasis is not on works that merit or earn salvation. It cannot be earned when faith is itself the gift of God to the children of the eternal covenant. Thus, this famous text has much in common with Ephesians 2.8-9 and Paul’s emphasis on faith as God’s gift and works as the goal of His giving. In view is how to please God and receive His commendation (approval, His “well done”). We do that by faith that works, by a working active faith. God’s approval and His blessing are obtained by this means.

### 2) The faithfulness of God

When we see that 11.1 boils down to faith in the future as part of what we hope for and expect, then all attention is on the Lord and His faithfulness. At every point in the cavalcade of saints who acted “by faith” our underlying thought is that God is faithful (**he who promised is faithful**, Heb. 10.23). The objective nature of faith, its substance, reminds us that it too is promised to us by our faithful Lord. Hence, the encouragement of 10.32-39 has an amazing reiteration in Hebrews 11. We are greatly encouraged to know that we are not of those who shrink back but those of faith to the preserving of our lives (10.39).

Consequently, no matter how great the challenge and no matter how difficult the circumstances, no matter how weak we may feel and how massive the situation may be, God is our helper enabling us to do the works of faith and by faith that He has ordained that we should walk in them. Having faith and doing the works of faith make up the evidence of God’s truth, goodness, and faithfulness. Remember Thomas who must see to believe; to him Jesus said, **"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"** (Jn. 20.29). Having faith is the evidence of being blessed according to God’s promise and faithfulness!

### 3) The heavenly mindset

It is important to acquaint ourselves with things invisible. God has revealed them for our stability and joy: **Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory** (1 Pet. 1.8). As Paul says, **we walk by faith, not by sight** (2 Cor. 5.7) and **<sup>17</sup>For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup>as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal** (2 Cor. 4.17-18).

There is a striking illustration of the heavenly mindset in 2 Chronicles. King Jehoshaphat faced a strong enemy and knew his and his armies powerlessness: **we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do.** Then he said what Hebrews 11 teaches us to say to the Lord, **but our eyes are on you** (20.12).

**May we fall down before the majesty of the triune God in praise to the faithfulness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.**