Hebrews 11:1 Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.

There it is, God’s own definition of what faith is. I was curious and so I went back to my original Catechism and checked…no, that passage was not circled as one that I had to memorize in class. I actually don’t think I began to appreciate that passage until after the NIV came out in 1984. It is possible that the true substance of that passage became mine as I first taught Catechism class during my Vicar year. What I can tell you is that for a long time now I have viewed this passage as of utmost importance.

And why not? It tells you what faith is! More important, it is God telling you what He says faith is. So let’s just wrestle with that little premise: “What is faith?”

According to my dictionaries I find the following definitions for the word “faith”. “1. Unquestioning belief, esp. in God, religion, etc. 2. A particular religion 3. Complete trust or reliance. 4. Loyalty.” Now I have to tell you that I find that some of those definitions fall just a bit short. Here’s why I say that. The first definition here says that faith is “unquestioning.” Don’t like that at all. God wants me to ask questions and seek answers. God wants me as a part of my faith to make sure that what I believe is what He says. The second definition given there is okay but doesn’t really tell you anything. Our language might reference “the Lutheran faith or the Catholic faith” but again we learn nothing about the nature of faith. Now, 3 and 4 are good. “Complete trust or reliance…loyalty.” Now we are learning something about faith.

Let’s look at the next dictionary. “1. Trust; believing without proof: 2. believing in God or in God’s promises. 3. What a person believes. 4. Religion: 5. Being loyal.” Those definitions are not much better. Again I am not enamored of number 1. It says trust…good, leave it right there, but no, they have to add: believing without proof. I don’t like that because that assumes that there is no proof for things like God, heaven, hell, angels and the like. How about trust because of proof? Of course, the next question to ask in that definition is what do you consider the basis of proof? Is the Bible proof? Is the life of Jesus proof? Is it only scientific proof? And if it is scientific proof, don’t we have to make sure it is really proof? After that please note that you are not really given a definition but rather examples of how the word is used in our language. I must admit I like 2 here, “believing in God or in God’s promises.” That is a good definition as long as we are agreed upon what God’s promises are or who God is. So, now we’ve learned a few things.

Back to our passage. Our passage is given by the inspiration of the Lord God. That means that this is God’s wisdom and revelation, God’s truth and knowledge shared with us, through man, in this case I believe the Apostle Paul. God says that faith is being sure. For the Christian, faith is being sure of what God has revealed. We trust in God and his ability to give us his wisdom and knowledge in the Bible. Faith is really being sure of God, which I think is hard for many people because their grasp and knowledge of God is pretty limited and often very wrong.

Note that this faith has an object. That object is hope. We trust in what we hope for, we are sure of what we hope for. Here is my hope. First, hope in God’s Word means: “a sure and certain confidence.” What this means is that I am sure and confident in things like God, the Bible, heaven, hell, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, forgiveness and life eternal. All of this is based on, relies on, is founded on the nature and characteristics of God. Again, if you have no true knowledge of God or false knowledge of God then faith is going to be pretty hard to have.

The second part of our verse says, **“Being convinced about things we do not see.”** Please note this is a Hebrewism, a statement that follows the pattern of Hebrew speaking. It is very common in the Hebrew language, especially in poetry, to make a statement and then the very next line is simply a repetition of that statement but in different words to drive home the point. In other words, the second part of our definition is simply making us think all the more about what the first part says. Faith is to be convinced of those things that we cannot see, of those things spiritual and other worldly, of those things from and of the realm and wonder of God. Now we have learned something!

So all of this brings us to a rather simple question: Do you have faith? Now mind you, we are not talking about just general trust and reliance on things. We are talking about whether or not you trust and believe in those things concerning God and his realm? But fear not, we have a practical guide to measuring our faith…the very history that God has given us. That history that God has given us gives us practical and foundational examples of what true faith is. We can learn about faith by looking at faith. Let’s jump in. Our theme will be: **FAITH!**

What does our next verse say, **“For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture.”** That line is telling us we can look at the faith of our forefathers in order to learn something about faith and then notice that is exactly what the next lines and verses do for us, take us back to the faith of the ancients to learn about faith. Verse 3.

**“By faith we know that the universe was created by God’s word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things.”** I like this verse. We are being told that the ancients, Adam, Eve, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and many others believed in the creation of the world by God. Here are a few interesting things to note. From Noah back to Adam there was simply experiential knowledge. Noah, if you calculate it out, actually knew people who knew Adam and Eve and no doubt heard and shared the knowledge that Adam and Eve had! Let that sink in. Also, note that up until the time of the flood, there would have been visible evidence of God in the world, namely the Garden of Eden, perhaps just the Tree of Life guarded and protected by cherubim and a flashing sword. Up until the flood anyone could go and see that wonderful evidence of the Lord God and his power. I am going to imagine that many wicked men tried to get to that tree and died! So in essence, up to Noah there was visible proof and evidence of God and his activity. That includes the fact that Noah was building an ark because God said it would rain and the world would flood even though rain was not a part of the world! Noah trust God!

From Noah on, that is after the flood, you still have evidence of the nature, activity and power of God. Noah and his sons had experienced the flood. No doubt they told their families and their children’s children the truth of what they had been through. That all went well until the Tower of Babel. The tower of Babel signifies a great change in mankind again. Mankind at this time has no regard for God or the wonder of God. They were building a tower and city to man’s glory and evidently ignoring the fact that God had commanded them to disperse and fill the world. So God separates man by the division of language. Mankind is no longer united by one language and because of sin you can surely bet that mankind is no longer united in the truth and wonder of God. Is it any wonder then that every major culture of the ancient world had a “the whole world destroyed in a flood and we are the only ones to survive” story? In other words, true knowledge of God is being obscured and lost because of sin.

Enter Moses. From Moses on mankind now needs to believe what God, through the prophets, is revealing. Here is the importance of God’s Word. It reveals the truth of creation, the horror of sin, the devastation sin has brought to the world and it reveals God’s expanded promises of a Savior from the sin that devastates. From this point on knowledge of God is revealed and not experiential. You know about God and his truth because God has revealed himself and his truth. Please note then that the nature of faith is changed. It is not about what you have experienced in God but rather what God has revealed about himself in His Word. Faith must now be in the Word of God. Our next verses.

**“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going.” By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God.”**

Here is what we know. For quite a while, God is somewhat silent in the world after the Tower of Babel. Once things settle down a bit, God calls Terah to go to the land of Canaan, but he never makes it there. It is his son Abraham who finally hears and obeys God. Didn’t know where he was going or what he would find, God simply tells him to go and he does. That’s faith. You do what God says, not because you have all the details or because you feel it is right or anything like that. You do because God says. That is truly an element of faith. When God tells you that salvation is because of his Son Jesus and what he has done, you believe that and you act, that is, you live that fact. What we learn is that true faith has an impact on your life. And then note what the second part of that section told us about faith.

How deeply did Abraham and his family believe? Even though they lived in this land of Canaan for at least 200 years, they never built any houses or lived in any cities. Why? They were waiting and trusting in God and what God wanted. All around them were people and cities and the like. They knew that God had said that it would be at least another 500 years before the land actually became theirs! They just trusted God. Trust! That is perhaps the most significant aspect of faith there is. Our next verses bear that out.

**11By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise. 12And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore.** Here is another example of simply trusting what God says. As you read that verse carefully you grasp that Abraham and Sarah did not have any children. Now, now that they are clearly past the age of having children God grants them a son. Grasp this, Abraham is told his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and the sand and yet at 99 he doesn’t have a child from Sarah! But at 100 he does all at the power and with the wonder of God. Abraham trusts God to do what God has said would be. Again, that element of trust. Reliance and confidence that what God has said will be!

The next verse is important. **“One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance.”**

Let’s put this all together for ourselves. Today, we have the complete revelation of what God not only promised, but how God fulfilled and kept every promise He made. We even have the record that God sent his Son Jesus and that Jesus is the Savior. What that means is that God in Jesus, forgives our sins and grants us the gift of eternal life and salvation, a heavenly home, simply because Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead for our eternal life and salvation. You need to hear that Word of God. You need to believe that Word of God because it is from God and because God has demonstrated time and time again that His Word is true! Not only do you believe that Word but you trust what that Word says without doubt!

That Word says when we leave this world because of sin, we are going to enter His eternal world of heaven and there be with Him for all eternity. The Word says that this is sure and certain because it does not depend on you and me, but on what God has promised and Jesus has done. Because of this trust in the truth of God this promise of Jesus, this gift of eternal life will and does impact your life to the utmost. We will be sinners who waver and have doubts because the world and the Devil will do its best to get us to stop trusting in God and his Word. Truth faith will continue to trust God and his Word because it is proven true in Jesus and it is fulfilled in Jesus.

This passage then comes true for us. We see and welcome from a distance the things that God has promised. We trust in the truth and reality of heaven. We believe in the wonder and marvel, the grace and love of God who has kept and fulfilled all his promises. We simply know and believe, yes hope and are convinced of what we do not see. Jesus is our Savior. Heaven is our home. All that God’s Word proclaims is truth and absolutely trustworthy. That is what faith is!

I pray that you have faith, true faith! I pray that you grasp the proof that God’s Word is when it comes to faith and the things promised. I pray your trust is always in God and His wonder, especially that awesome and simple message of Jesus as your Savior from sin. Someday may all those you know say of you, “By faith they have lived their life!” Amen.