

Faith is...

Encouraging Thoughts from Hebrews 11:1

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2015

What is faith? I remember as a young boy I was sitting in a Bible class and the teacher was explaining “faith” in terms first-graders could understand. He explained: “When you sat down on your chair, you had faith that the chair would hold you and not break, didn’t you!? That’s what faith is—believing that the chair will not break when you sit on it. You had faith in the chair.” He went on to explain that it’s the same with God: we have faith that God will do what He promised to do.

The problem I had with the teacher’s explanation of faith was that not long before I had attempted to make a stool in my Dad’s basement workshop. There was plenty of wood scraps around, and so I found a board for the seat and four pieces of wood that would work for legs. With a handsaw I cut the four pieces to be equal in length and proceeded to nail them to the seat to make a nice stool. When I finished, I stood back and looked at my finished project. It was a bit lopsided, but not too bad. So I took it down from the workbench, put it on the floor, and sat on it. I fully expected it to work just fine, but of course, the poorly made project collapsed when I sat on it and I found myself on the floor.

So with my recent experience in mind, I understood my teacher’s explanation of faith quite differently than what I think he intended. In my young boy’s mind, I thought: “You can’t have faith until after you sit on the chair! Only when you’ve tested it can you have faith to sit on it again!” In this way, faith was something one got from experience, not something one had before the experience. How could you have faith in something you can’t see? How could I know that the chair would hold me until after I tried it? What if my experience told me not to trust chairs at all?

Not long after my not-so-good experience of building my own stool, my Dad asked me: “Tim, did you try to make something in the workshop? I found some pieces of wood on the bench. It looks like someone was working on a project.” I told him about my attempts to make a stool, and that it didn’t work, and how the stool broke when I sat on it. He just smiled and said, “That’s okay. The better you become at working with wood, the better you’ll be at making things that won’t break.” Then I mentioned to him the story about my Bible class and the teacher’s explanation of faith. I well remember his wise words as he responded to my story. He said, “You can trust that the chair will hold you if you know the person who built the chair.”

Yes! That made perfect sense, because everything my Dad built worked! If he had built the stool, I knew full well that it would have been strong and would not have broken when I sat on it. In fact, we have some of the furniture he built in our home today—still strong, still working. So it wasn’t faith in the chair but in the one who built the chair.

This boyhood experience came to my mind recently as we studied Hebrews 11:1 in our Wednesday evening study in the book of Hebrews. The well known verse reads: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (NASB). The structure of the verse is clear: the opening clause is echoed by the second clause in typical parallel fashion. Thus, the second clause helps to explain or amplify the first clause. Thus, using the English translation of the NASB, we can see the obvious parallels: “assurance” is parallel to “conviction,” and “things hoped for” is matched by “things not seen.”

The first thing we need to get clear is that the word “hope” is used by the author of Hebrews of that which is certain but not yet possessed (cf. 3:6; 6:11, 18–19; 7:19; 10:23). He is not using the word “hope” (Greek *elpizō/elpidos*) as it is often used in our world, to describe a person’s wants or wishes. For the author of Hebrews (and this is true elsewhere in the Scriptures), one’s hope is the settled belief and conviction of what is true and certain, and which therefore produces firm assurance that what God has promised to do in the future is as sure as that which He has already accomplished in the past. This is why in Hebrews 11 the author brings as “proof” the actions of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the “heroes of faith.” Faith is not some inner feeling that we “ratchet up” when things in life get difficult. The divine gift of faith brings the settled conviction that God exists, and that His actions in the history of our world form a firm basis upon which we know He will accomplish in the future all that He has promised, both on a worldwide scope as well as in the lives of each of His children.

The words that the author of Hebrews uses in his explanation of “faith” are quite interesting. The first word, translated “assurance,” is the Greek word *hupostasis*. Depending upon the context, this word can offer either a subjective or an objective sense. In a subjective sense it can mean “assurance” or “confidence” while in an objective way it describes what is “reality,” “true nature,” or “genuine substance” of something. It is used two other times in Hebrews: 1:3 and 3:14.

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.... (Heb 1:3)

For we have become partakers of Messiah, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.... (Heb 3:14)

In 1:3, *hupostasis* means “reality,” or “true nature,” meaning that Yeshua Himself is the exact revelation of the Father’s true divine nature. In 3:14, our word *hupostasis* designates the reality upon which our faith lays hold, that is, the promise of God in the person and work of Yeshua, the promised Messiah.

This helps us understand how the author of Hebrews used *hupostasis* in 11:1. Faith is the genuine substance, the reality, the true nature of that which we do not yet see but is promised by God and is therefore sure. An additional insight may be gleaned by seeing how the word *hupostasis* was used in the everyday language of the first century. Papyrus scraps of text have been uncovered by archaeologists which give us this picture, and our word *hupostasis* shows up a number of times in the papyri. The standard lexicon of the papyri describes the various ways the word is used in the common language of the times in which the Apostolic Scriptures were written, one of which is to designate a “title-deed.” Moulton and Milligan, authors of the lexicon, conclude their thoughts on the Greek word *hupostasis* this way:

These varied uses are at first sight somewhat perplexing, but in all cases there is the same central idea of something that underlies visible conditions and guarantees a future possession. And as this is the essential meaning in Heb 11:1, we venture to suggest the translation “Faith is the title-deed of things hoped for.” (Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* [Eerdmans, 1930], p. 660)

This is precisely what the author of Hebrews wants us to see. Faith, true saving faith, lays hold of that which has already been proven, and grasps this as the very title-deed for the future. Indeed, chapter 11 of Hebrews is a catalog of historical events in the lives of historical people which demonstrate God’s faithfulness to those who are His. We therefore have a great “cloud of witnesses” who have come before us, and who stand as the very reality of what faith truly is—the *hupostasis*, the “title-deed” in our own hands of things yet future, that is, the promise of eternal life with God in the world to come.

And of all those historical events upon which our faith rests, the resurrection of Yeshua is the cornerstone. Did Yeshua die and return to life on the third day? Yes, He did. Eye witnesses of this historical event number far more than two or three, for our resurrected Lord was seen by thousands, and eye witnesses wrote about this—testimony we have in the very pages of the Apostolic Scriptures. Therefore, if Yeshua rose from the dead, then all He said and all He did is truth, and thus He, the promised Messiah, is the quintessential fulfillment of all the promises made by Israel’s prophets, for it is in Him and through His work that all of the promises of God are “yes and amen” (2Cor 1:20). In that sense, He is the One Who has signed the “title-deed” we possess.

Saving faith, the gift of God to all who are His, is therefore a reality, not a mere self-energized inner feeling, or convincing oneself of something that cannot be proven. Faith is the very title-deed, written upon the heart of every believer, inscribed by the very presence of the Ruach, and which therefore assures the child of God that He will always be faithful to all He has promised.

How then do we grow in faith? We grow in faith through understanding and applying the word of God, and in so doing, to appreciate and grasp with greater firmness the “title-deed” which is ours. Most surely the enemy of our souls would love to plant seeds of doubt as to whether the “title-deed” is authentic. And even in the weakness of our flesh, one may wonder if their name is actually inscribed on that “title-deed.” But if we, with perseverance, feed upon and are nourished by the Scriptures, communing with God in prayer and worship, then the “title-deed”

we hold brings increased assurance in God's faithfulness and a conviction of His love toward us—a conviction which cannot be taken away and which, by His grace and strength, will remain steadfast with a view to His coming.