

"The True Character of Saving Faith"

Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Allow the love of God the Father to fill you with wonder; the sacrifice of God the Son to fill you with gratitude; and may the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit fill you with faith, hope, and confidence. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: We should fully expect that our adversaries will attack the most critical aspects of the Christian faith. Their vast experience has taught them that the best way to accomplish the destruction of the Christian soul is to chip away at it, to take small bites, death by a thousand cuts – pick your metaphor. In other words, we can and should expect an endless number of small challenges and tiny battles. We can therefore expect challenges to every individual aspect of the Christian faith, for evil seeks out the weak spot in every Christian's defenses. When the devil finds it, he exploits it. Think of the human body. Deadly bacteria and viruses don't need to find multiple entry points; they need only one.

That's exactly why the wise Christian continually evaluates and reevaluates *everything*. That's why we examine and reexamine even the simple basics, like definitions of key words and concepts together with our understanding of those basic elements of Christianity - things like sin, grace, and justification. By doing so, what we often find is evidence of an attempted breach by our enemies. Our understanding of the key components of our faith can be subtly shifted or eroded over time, and that shift can leave us vulnerable.

Take, for example, the basic Christian element we know as "saving faith." Last week we were reminded that faith always has an object; that is, that genuine Christian faith must be based on an actual promise of God, rather than some vague, human thought or desire. But there is more to a full and correct understanding of saving Christian faith than just that, and that fuller, more complete understanding is provided by our text for this morning. That text is, in fact, widely regarded as the definitive Word of God on the subject – the 11th Chapter of the Book of Hebrews:

ESV Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ 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... ⁸ ¶ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to*

receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. ¹³ ¶ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

This is the Word of God. In great awe and humility we acknowledge this fact and seek to sit attentively at the feet of these words and to both learn the lessons and gain the benefits that our God intends for us to hereby possess. To this end we pray: **"Sanctify us by the truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

There are those who help, and there are those who are helped. You are Christians, so I assume you would rather be the ones giving the help than the ones receiving it from others. Yet as is the case in almost all areas of life, there is good and bad here. It is obviously better to prefer "pulling the wagon" than to seek always to ride while others pull your weight (not to mention how necessary such an attitude is for the survival of any society.) A good work ethic is obviously God-pleasing, for God himself tells us as much in his Word. Paul reminded us, for example, that not only should we not steal, we should work hard so that we have extra to give to those in need (Ephesians 4:28). The bad here, however, is when that sort of good outlook or attitude is born of pride, rather than the Holy Spirit working through the new man in the Christian heart. As sinful human beings, we naturally tend to think of ourselves as superior, which means we generally find it rather difficult to admit when we have a need that someone else must supply. Those who have been in both positions (benefactor and recipient) know firsthand how much more superior it feels to be the giver rather than the receiver.

Obviously this natural feeling of superiority is bad enough, but there is something even more sinister at work here – more evil and diabolical. Our natural desire to be the donor rather than the recipient constantly wars against the character and nature of the gospel and saving faith. There we are always the pauper, always the recipient, always the ones in desperate need.

We need to come to terms with this basic truth, which brings us to our first lesson about faith: God-pleasing faith is, and must ever be, profoundly humble.

Think back to our Old Testament lesson for this morning, to Abraham as he sat alone outside his tent – an old man frustrated at the fact that he had no heir. How utterly humbling to be told by God to look up at the stars and to hear the divine promise that his descendants would be equally uncountable. Humbling, because Abraham had to know that there was no way he could do this on his own. His human effort had failed. He and Sarah had no strength or ability, humanly speaking, to create the human life that they craved. They found themselves therefore in a most revealing and humbling place. If they were to have an heir, that child would have to be miraculously provided for them. They would have to be the humble recipients.

Abject humility is therefore the first characteristic of the Christian faith we need to acknowledge this morning, and for some of us perhaps the only way we can learn such a lesson is to suffer great need or helplessness. When we are always the provider rather than the recipient (always the helper rather than the one being helped) how difficult to bow our heads before our God and acknowledge our utter inability and our profound deficiency. How difficult to truly acknowledge that we have no power to supply what we so desperately need.

True Christian faith is first of all therefore humble. It is also blind.

Obviously faith always believes *something*. That is, faith has an object – something that it believes to be true or reliable on the basis of God's promise. Our text however explains that *true* faith believes whatever it believes not on the basis of what can be seen or proved, but on the very opposite – on that which can in no way be verified. Faith involves believing that which could never stand up in a modern court of law. Faith believes something for which there is no observable, irrefutable, empirical evidence. Our text used those words that are so familiar to many of you to describe the true nature or character of the thing: **"Now**

faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Think back to Abraham alone looking up at the stars. Absolutely nothing on earth supported God's promise. There was no logical, rational, scientific reason for Abraham to believe what God was telling him. He believed it anyway. Faith is blind.

You have things like that in your life. If you haven't yet, you will. You have had or will have problems that are insurmountable – situations for which there is simply no solution. Recall Jairus, who came to Jesus because his daughter was at the point of death from sickness. While Jesus was still on the way to see the girl, word came that she had died. Truly an insurmountable problem. Jesus words to Jairus are the very same words he would speak to us this morning: ***"Do not fear; only believe."*** The object of Jairus' faith – that which he was told to "only believe" – was Jesus' promise that he would help his daughter. Yet everything in the man's earthly experience told him that help must arrive before death, not after. Faith is therefore blind in that it trusts God's Word even in the absence of any visible evidence.

Contrast the world's blind faith in this regard with Christian faith. The world *has* blind faith, but of a much different sort. The third verse of our text reminds us that we believe in creation blindly, because God says it is so in his Word. The world believes blindly in evolution. The difference? The world's blind faith trusts in man, in self, in the impossible notion that we somehow created ourselves. The Christian's blind faith looks to God's Word and there places its trust. So too the object of Abraham and Sarah's faith was the word and promise of their God, not their own power or ability. In our Old Testament lesson we read: ***"And he (Abram) believed the LORD, and he (the Lord) counted it to him as righteousness."*** (Genesis 15:6) God was teaching Abraham and Sarah – and *us* – that it is not the strength of the individual or of the individual's faith that is important, it is the object that is believed, even in the absence of corroborating evidence. Faith that trusts always and only in the Word and Promise of the One True God is never disappointed, never fails, never knows change or modification, is never in doubt – *because that Word and promise of God never changes*.

Faith therefore is humble, acknowledging the inability to provide what is needed, and it is blind, believing something to be true in the absence of any human proof – simply because God said so. It is also a pauper, an indigent, for true faith always acknowledges a profound, monstrous need that God alone can supply. Like a beggar,

therefore, true saving faith always has its hand out, asking to receive.

In fact it is critically important to know not only that faith is humble and blind, but that faith is the indigent that always acknowledges a need that must be supplied by God. In our relationship with our God, we are always the beggars. We are always the ones who come, hat in hand, in dire need of that which we ourselves cannot hope to provide. We are the ones who are **"poor in spirit,"** who **"hunger and thirst after righteousness."** We are the ones who are continually characterized by a **"contrite and broken spirit,"** and who come daily begging our God **"take not your Holy Spirit from me, but restore to me the joy of your salvation."** Christian faith therefore always involves receiving. We are the ones who come to our God as miserable, starving creatures, rightly singing, *"Just as I am without one plea..."*

The sinful pride of mankind seeks always to turn this true and right understanding of faith on its ear. In the minds of many, faith has been twisted into a work that man must do, as though faith is the element that *man* provides, and on that basis he is saved. *Faith is actually a description of the receptive quality in the human heart.* In and of itself "faith" has no merit. It is not faith that saves us, it is what is *received by faith*. Faith is the savings account, opened by the Holy Spirit, into which God has already placed all of the necessary funds. It is the empty, outstretched, beseeching hands of a beggar, "hands" created there by God the Holy Spirit alone, whose needs are then satisfied by God himself.

The best news of all, as far as you and I are concerned, is that into our outstretched, needy, begging hands of faith God has placed trust and confidence in the forgiveness that Jesus earned for every single one of our sins. Faith is the means by which we access, or share in, the forgiveness that Jesus has already earned. Not so with those who believe that they need nothing. To all such God gives nothing. To imagine that you yourself provide anything for your own salvation is to deny Christ and to exclude yourself from the payment he made for your sin upon Calvary's cross. It is to "opt out" of that divine settlement.

How foolish then to think of God's declaration of innocence (his justification) as anything other than a gift that we have received through humble, blind faith. When God looked at us from the holy, eternal perspective of heaven, he saw us as exactly what we were – unworthy sinners all. Yet on the basis of the goodness of his Son, God has credited his Son's perfection as the payment in full for our sins – and in so doing he has also promised us a kingdom, a city, an existence that

(like the patriarchs of old) will not be realized until after this life has ended.

This is obviously then the best of all news for you and me, and for every sinner on earth. We are indeed needy, but our great needs – *all* of them – have been supplied by our God. Humbly acknowledge this fact and fall gratefully upon your knees before your God as the beggar that you truly are. But then also thrill to the fact that the object of your faith is God's own promise that he has forgiven your sins, freely and forever, and that as your Heavenly Father he will continue to supply all that you need to remain and grow in that one true saving faith. Amen.

ESV **Genesis 15:1-6** After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

ESV **Luke 12:32-40** "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. ³⁵ ¶ "Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, ³⁶ and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. ³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! ³⁹ But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

ESV **Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ 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... ⁸ ¶ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. ¹³ ¶ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.



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The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – August 10, 2025

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 433 (Blue Hymnal)

"God Loved the World So That He Gave"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 1ff. (Blue Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Genesis 15:1-6) Our Old Testament Lesson helps to form the basis of our Sermon text for this morning. It speaks to us of Abraham (then still called "Abram") and how he was both chosen and then blessed by God himself. Yet we hear and regard these words wrongly if we imagine that Abraham earned God's favor because of his faith. Such a thing is not possible when we recognize that faith itself is a gift from our God. As is true also with us, Abraham's faith was an undeserved gift from his God.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 96 (Blue Hymnal Page 88)

The Second Lesson: (Luke 12:32-40) As Abraham obeyed God's command, even if it meant leaving his home and wandering in a strange land and living in a tent for the rest of his life, so we too are supposed to recognize God's call to live in this world as those who are not owners, but strangers passing through. Our true, lasting hope never has as its object or goal the things of this world or our life here in time. This life is meant only to prepare us for the eternal life to come.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed (Projected on Screens)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 555 (Blue Hymnal)

"Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"

The Sermon – Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"The True Character of Saving Faith"

The Offertory – (Blue Hymnal page 7)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 560 (Stanzas 1-3, 6-7) (Blue Hymnal)

"How Firm a Foundation"

The Prayers of the Day

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Blue Hymnal page 9)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Blue Hymnal page 14)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 191 (Blue Hymnal)

"Lord, Dismiss Us with Your Blessing"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (32) Average (37)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service with Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Picnic
Tuesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Emeritus John Schierenbeck has accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor of Peace Thru Christ Lutheran Church of Middleton, WI. Pastor Matthew Hanel in considering the call to Messiah Lutheran Church of Eau Claire, WI. Teacher Kathleen Naumann has returned the call to Luther Memorial School of Fond du Lac, WI. Pastor David Ude has accepted the call to St. Stephen Lutheran Church of Mountain View, CA. Pastor Emeritus David Schierenbeck has accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor of Our Redeemer's of Red Wing, MN. Mr. Peter Reim has returned the vacancy call to Messiah of Eau Claire, WI. Pastor Paul Tiefel has announced his retirement effective Sep. 7th.

Vacation Bible School – Thanks once again to those who used their God-given talents and treasure during VBS this week.

Annual Church Picnic – Our annual Church Picnic is scheduled for this morning following the worship service. Please join us! There is always more than enough food for all. The children are also planning to sing one of the songs they learned this week at VBS.

Church Council Meeting – A reminder that the Church Council is scheduled to meet at 6:00 pm on Tuesday of this week.