

Reading from the Book of Hebrews. Now, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God, god's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith, Enoch was taken from this life, but he did not experience death. He could not be found because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen and holy fear, built an arc to save his family. By his faith, he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country he lived in. Hence, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundation, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful, who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith. When they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The word of the Lord. Please stand for the reading of the Gospel. A reading from the Gospel of Luke. The apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. He replied, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to the mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you. The word of the Lord.

Except for our kids. We are going to send you off the kids alive. That's kids up to fourth grade. So let's pray for the kids. Heavenly Father, we thank you for our children, Lord. You love them and they have amazing ability to comprehend Your word, to take it in and to simply believe it with faith like a child. We ask that faith would grow, Lord, in them and in us. In Jesus name, amen. Alright, God bless you guys as you go off to the kids alive. Alright. Now, if you all want to join me in prayer for us kids, all right. Heavenly Father, we invite you to do a miracle today in our midst. To take hearts that are sometimes bruised and battered or hardened by the world and to soften them to Your Word. To use human lips to speak ageless truths, Lord, to speak the very word of God, that we might comprehend it and grasp it and grow that we might have faith like a child. Lord Jesus, increase our faith. We pray in your name. Amen. Amen. So we're in Hebrews chapter eleven, and I can't imagine a better passage if the theme is faith.

At one point, the disciples said that Jesus, increase our faith. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been? My faith just weak, it's not where it should be. Lord, increase my faith. What does that look like? How do you increase your faith? I had a kind of a prayer object lesson many years ago. I was a youth minister at the time. I was working with teenagers and a man in common had led a retreat for the adults. And I attended that retreat and he said, you know, as men we often have a hard time believing and receiving God's love. And he said, So I did something for myself years ago. I decided that every time I saw a bird, I would take it as God's sign of love for me. And he said, so when I see a bird, I say, thank you, God. I love you. I love you too. And if I see a flock of birds, he said, I just start laughing, hallelujah. And he praises God. Well, I took that to heart and I thought I need that. I need to kind of expand my ability to sense God's presence, increase my faith.

Anyway, and you'll see how this relates. I had been invited to a golf outing, a fundraiser at the local country club, and I had just gotten into golf a couple of years before, so I was super excited because I

normally played on cheap courses, but I was going to get to play like the supreme courts in our area and so I was super excited. Now, the night before I saw the weather forecast and we live in Pittsburgh at the time and the weather forecast was rain. And when it forecasted rain in Pittsburgh, it almost always rains and it was supposed to be 100%. So I was leading a Bible study with about 30 young people that night, and we got to time to share prayer requests. And I said, you guys are going to think this is funny, but I'm supposed to golf in this golf outing tomorrow, and I am so excited about it. But the weather forecast is 100% rain. Would you guys pray that it won't rain? And this my kid looked at me, goes, Patrick, you can't do that. And I said yes, I can. And he says no. There's so many important things in the world and big things to pray for.

You can't pray that God will stop the rain so you can golf. And I said, Well, I can try. And so they prayed for me. They prayed that it wouldn't rain. Well, that morning, I get up and it's raining, and I drive to the golf course, and it's raining, and I go into the clubhouse, and I meet up with my foursome. One of them is my pastor. And I said, It's going to stop raining? And he goes, I don't think so. I said, Our youth group prayed last night, and it's going to stop raining. And he said, okay, you guys prayed about the rain? I said we did. He goes, all right. Well, sure enough, the rain stopped by the time we were supposed to tee off. So we tee off, and we play. And it's a beautiful day. I mean, just a beautiful day. We play all day, 18 holes. We get to the 18th green, and we're putting on the green, and as we're putting, a flash of lightning streaks across the sky. They hit the lightning siren to tell everybody to get off the golf course. We finished our putts, and I said, you see?

And just as I said that, four geese flew about 20ft overhead, one for each golfer in our foursome. And I said, you see, Jeff, that was the name of our pastor. God loves us. God loves us. We went into the clubhouse, and it immediately started pouring. I mean, the skies broke open. How's that for faith? I know there are more important things, and I've prayed about way more important things in our lives and the lives of our children, in the lives of our church. And I knew that God could say no. My faith was not that it would not rain. My faith was in the idea that there is a God who hears our prayers. There is a God whose overall creation there is a God who, if he wants to, can dry up the rains, and if he wants to, can make them fall. And if he wants to tell one of his little children, I love you with four geese on a sunny day, he can do it. So increase our faith, Lord. How does that work? Is it just simply about praying prayers like that from time to time, praying for a parking space, things like that?

Or is there something more to it? Well, in Hebrews, chapter eleven, it gives us the definition of faith. It says that faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. Confidence, that very word means with faith. Confidence with faith in what we hope for, in assurance for what we do not see. That is what the ancients were commended for. So what the writer of Hebrews is telling us is we can actually learn from those who have gone before us, the ancients. We tend to look at the ancients as the heroes of the faith when we read chapter eleven. But you know what? There were people like you and me when you really read the Bible, you come to see that these ancients in a lot of ways are not so commendable. Some of the things they did, some of their foibles and their faults and their flaws, some pretty horrendous things even. But the writer of Hebrews doesn't say they were commended for living perfect lives since they were commended for in the midst of the lives we live, in, the midst of chaos, in the midst of brokenness, in the midst of their own faults and flaws, they trusted God, they had faith.

This is what they were commended for. I don't know about you, but my faith was not sealed on that day. As a youth minister some 30 years ago or whatever, that was just one step and all along the way I found reason over time to cry out to the Lord, increase my faith and to seek from the word of God, like, what does it mean for my faith to grow? And so I want to today look at the faith of the ancients and see what kind of attitudes and what kind of actions they took that could potentially increase our faith. So as we read this, we come to verse three and it says by faith we and I love that because before it gets into these heroes of the faith, it says we've got a part to play. 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. What it's saying is that you and I every day have the opportunity for faith simply by looking at the sky, simply by looking at creation and saying there is a God behind all of this.

That's not always so easy. You would think it is. I remember standing watching a sunset with a fellow

worker. This was before I was a minister, I was an actor and we had been touring around the country and we had this break and we were standing by a lake as the sun was setting and I said, when I see something like that, I can't help but believe in God. So I said, how about you? And he goes, not at all. It doesn't speak about God to me at all. I couldn't believe it. And yet it takes faith to understand that God is behind it all. Nature, it is said, is red in tooth and claw. The God who made the animals that we love has also made animals that sometimes kill us. The God who makes the nature that we love is also standing over that nature, allowed that nature to turn on us as floods and famines and fires. And all those things happen. And those things cause people to say, where is God and who is God? And there cannot be a God. And yet, like Job, we're called to say the Lord gives and the Lord takes away that we live in a fallen world and a broken world.

And yet it's a beautiful world. And behind it all and over it all, and through it all is God working out even the disasters for his very purposes in our lives. One of the attitudes of the ancients was to see God behind it all and then to take action. Because of that. We read in verse four by faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks even though he is dead because his brother Cain killed him. And why did Cain kill him? We read about it in Genesis, chapter four. Cain was jealous because God accepted Abel's offering. What was the difference? Well, Cain Cain or Able, it said, brought the first fruits of his livestock, the best that he had to offer, and he gave it to God. But Abel, it says, brought some of his produce from the ground. Earlier in chapter three, it said that cursed is the ground. And I don't know if that's related to that, that he was offering something from the cursed ground. I don't think so, because later on, people do bring grain offerings to God.

But what he did was simply bring some of what he had, perhaps the leftovers, after he had harvested what he wanted for himself. You see, there are actions we can take to build our faith when we follow in the way of able. We bring our best. We bring our first. We say to God, with our time, Lord, you've got the best of my attention today. You've got the best of my efforts. We say that with our talents, with everything that we have. I love that in this church people are bringing their talents forward and saying, I'd like to find a way to use them here for the building of God's work here in our midst. And God does that. He gladly receives what people offer and then our treasure. What Abel did is a model for our own giving of our tithes and our offerings. If we give what is left over, God doesn't want it. He just simply doesn't want it. But if we say, I'm going to give from the first fruits, lord, in the Old Testament, they gave 10%. It's very rare today, even in Christianity, to find those who give 10%.

But I oftentimes find the joy of giving even more than that, of saying, lord, I want what I give to be first. I want what I give to be sacrificial. I want it to be generous. And when we do that, guess what? We grow in faith because we're saying to God, I trust you for all the rest. I trust you with my family. I trust you with my home and my possessions. And so it's a way of actively by action, putting trust in God by giving first of our time, our talents and our treasures, by following in the way of able. For God is worthy of it all. He's above it all and worthy of it all. And then in verse five, we see Enoch, and he displays both an action and an attitude. It says, by faith, Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death. He could not be found because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. In Genesis five, it says that Enoch walked faithfully with God, which was saying a lot because it occurs in a genealogy that begins with Cane killing Abel and only seems to get worse from there.

In fact, the wickedness of humanity and the violence and the oppression and the lack of worship and the rebellion towards God would blossom and bloom during those years until God was grieved that he had ever made humanity and would wipe out most of humanity in a flood. But in the midst of that, in the middle of those generations, is ena. And it says, he walked faithfully with God. His attitude was that God was a friend. God was one he could walk with. I love that we mix hymns and worship songs, praise songs, like we just saying, hallelujah, what a savior. What a beautiful way you've shown us. I've never known a love like this. Well, there are other churches where they major on those songs, so they rarely ever sing a hymn might be The Vineyard, might be Hillsong and Bethel. And they've given us some beautiful, intimate, loving, worship songs. And while we use liturgy oftentimes to draw our hearts up towards God, what they emphasize is that relationship with God, open yourself, get lost in his love and worship Him. And it's powerful. If you've ever really entered into it and experienced it.

I know for some it's like, oh, I don't know if I could do that, but it's powerful. Enoch had that kind of relationship with God, a friendship, a walking with him. And it's commended, and I commend it to you if you want to build your faith, develop that friendship with God. Develop that love relationship and that love language with God. Invite him in on your day and just talk to him throughout the day. Hey, God, see a bird and say, thank you, God. I love you. I love you too. Yeah. It's a great way to develop and build our faith. But there's more than simply that, for it says, without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. We're told to do this because there's reward in it. A relationship with God is that isn't in itself its own reward. When you go into your closet and you pray, Jesus said, your father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

What's?

He reward you with himself. When you fast, when you give, don't do it for the sake of others. You've got an audience of one. And your God who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And what's the reward? It's that hard connection. It's like, oh, I'm becoming like Jesus. I'm feeling you, God. I'm sensing who you are. More and more, I'm living into it. Kurt Vonnegut is a secular humanist. I think he's passed away by now, but he's a great American author and some of his quotes are really wonderful quotes. I came across him talking about humanism, and he says, in humanism, kindness is the point. And he said to be kind. Not because you expect some reward in the afterlife, but simply to be kind. But I would say to Kurt, kindness is its own reward. And when you are acting out of kindness, what you're doing oftentimes is you're earning the praise of others around you who say, adam boy, good job. Right? You're earning Kurt Vonnegut's praise. It's this human nature for us to respond to reward. And what gets rewarded gets repeated in the Bible, promises God rewards, he rewards it.

And it's good to be unapologetic about it and saying, I love that, and I want that. But it's not simply a friendship with God that's commended for it says, by faith. Noah, when warned about things not yet seen in holy fear, built an ark to save his family. By his faith, he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. So, what's underlined with Noah, in contrast to Enoch is Noah has a relationship with God of awe and reverence and holy fear. He believes that God is who he says he is, that God is just, God is the judge, and that for our sins, we deserve punishment. Unless God provides a merciful way out, which he does with Noah, with the ark, and what she does with Jesus and forgiving us our sins. But just because Jesus forgives us our sins doesn't mean and I hope I'm not contradicting myself doesn't mean we're just supposed to always be buddy buddy with God, right? Hey. God. What's up? I'm saving God. I love you. I love you.

You're.

My God. And I love you. Right? We want to build that friendship with God. We want to remember that he's our friend. But we also want to remember not just that he's near, but that he's high above, that he's awesome, that he's holy. We do not deserve him. He's good, so good that if he appeared in our midst right now, we'd all fall on our faces in holy fear and reverence. So we seek to find ways to build our faith through reverence. And that's, I think, one of the blessings of communion, of coming to receive of the body and the blood of Christ, of saying, Jesus did this for me. I worship you. It comes when we sing the ancient hymns, when we remind ourselves of the great and deep truths of the faith, when we pray the prayers of our forefathers and we see what a walk they had in Christ. Our spirits, our intellects, our souls are expanded and our faith grows. I love how multifaceted our faith is as we see it in Hebrews, chapter eleven. Another example of attitude and actions comes in verses eight through twelve. By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance obeyed.

And he went even though he did not know where he was going. By faith, he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived intense, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise, for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful, who had made the promise. And so from this one

man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and as countless as the sands on the seashore. Or how much we owe to the faith of Abraham and Sarah. How much we owe. But here's the question where are you stepping out in faith if you do an honest assessment of your life? Is everything carefully negotiated? Is everything carefully planned? Are all your I's dotted and your T's crossed so that you don't need faith? Right? That's how America is designed. It's designed to remove the need for faith as much as possible, to give everybody the chance to prosper as much as they possibly can, to be as socially connected as they can.

It just doesn't build fate. But if you look at your life and you say, God, show me where I can step out, could be that I'm stepping out by being part of a church plan and being uncomfortable in a warehouse. It may be that I'm stepping out because I believe God is calling me to do something in my neighborhood or something with my job. That is scary, and I'm going to have to trust Him. Pray prayers of faith. People of God, step out, examine your life and see, and then step out because God will bless you and use that to increase your capacity to know Him, to love Him, and to achieve his purposes in this world. That's what our forefathers did and our mothers in the faith. Our parish council right now is reading a book called Pursuing God's Will Together, and we're really hoping it's going to be a model for the church. We have just basically made a commitment to one another that we're not going to do anything in this church unless we really believe God is calling us to do it. We're not going to do it because some other church is doing it.

We're not going to do it because some book says, you got to do this. We're not going to do it because we're just so smart and we've come up with great ideas or anything, but we're going to say, God, please speak to us. And we expect God to speak to us, and we're going to be unanimous. And if we're not unanimous, we're going to wait until God makes us unanimous. So we're stepping out as we're doing this. I've never let a church quite like that before. This is a new thing for me to say. We're committing to this 100%, and our hope really will be that it begins to kind of meld its way through the whole congregation so that we become a people in this world where we're just different than the world, and the world will see that God is active in our lives and say, I want that. I don't know what it is, but I want it because God is doing things among you that I've never seen before. That's the path and the course that's been laid out for us in the attitudes and the actions of the ancients. How do you get there?

We get there through Jesus, right? Jesus is the fulfillment of all of this. Not only did Jesus sacrifice the very best upon the cross, he gave his very life for his Father. He lived a life that the ancients were commended for. He obeyed God. He said, I don't do anything unless the Father shows me. When we say that, that's what we're going to do, we're walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus looked at the sky, and even in death, when he said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Where are you? Yet he commended his soul unto his Father, believing that though he could not see, God was behind it all and over it all and worthy of it all. It's through Jesus that you and I are commended for our faith. It's through Jesus that we follow in the footsteps of the ancients, for was completely fulfilled in Him. I love being on this journey with you. Let's pray. Oh, Father, we've never known a love like yours. You are good and awesome and true and we want to follow you. Increase our faith, Lord, beyond praying for parking spaces or for the rain not to fall.

Increase our faith to live life as Jesus lived, to bring honor and glory to you. To offer our very best and everything we think and say and do. And when we get tired and weary and lonely and broken, restore our faith that we might mount up with wings like eagles. And soar in the heavens where Jesus has won for us a place with our God. We love you, Lord Jesus. In your name we pray. Amen.