<u>"Does Faith Really Matter?"</u>

Sermon Series on *Tough Questions*
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(Heb. 11:1-6)

Introduction.

Have you ever seen the tightrope walker Nik Wallenda on TV in recent years? Several times he's staged a high wire act that is death-defying, including the crossing of Niagara Falls. He's pretty amazing in his ability to balance on a narrow cable and walk over great expanses.

Many years ago his grandfather Karl Wallenda stretched a cable between two buildings in New York City. A crowd gathered on the top of one of the buildings, and another gathered below on the street. Wallenda amazed the people with his ability to walk across the narrow cable with no net below to catch him if he made a mistake.

At one point Wallenda took a wheelbarrow and walked it across the cable safely to the other building and back. All the people applauded. Then he asked the crowd, "Who believes I can put a person in this wheelbarrow and walk them safely across the wire?" Almost everyone raised their hands. Then Wallenda pointed to one of the people whose hand was raised and said, "You be the first to get in!"[1]

It's one thing to give intellectual ascent to a proposition. It's completely another to put the whole weight of one's trust into what we say we believe. That's what faith is all about. This morning we're going to conclude our sermon series on Tough Questions with a discussion on the subject of faith, and the question I want to ask and answer is: "Does faith really matter?"

<u>I. What Is Faith?</u>

The passage we've read this morning begins by explaining the nature and the quality of true faith from a Christian point of view. The author of Hebrews doesn't saying everything there is to say about biblical faith, but here at least he explains it in its basic terms. He writes, *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. That is what the ancients were commended for" (11:1,2).*

Here the author of Hebrews points out that in OT times there were many people who had nothing but the promises of God to rely on, and they didn't have any visible evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled. Yet they were willing to trust God, and they oriented their whole lives around their confidence in the

Lord. Their faith consisted simply in taking God at His Word, and they believed that what the Lord said He would do.

Faith is a person's response to what God has said, and it takes seriously the message of Scripture. It evaluates present circumstances in light of God's promises, and it listens for the voice of the Lord and looks for the fingerprints of God in daily life to determine His leading and His guidance. Faith also anticipates the future, and it believes that better things are coming for the person who trusts in Christ.

Faith believes that the story hasn't finished being written yet, and that God is still at work both to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Phil 1:6). No matter how bad things may look at the moment, faith believes that the Lord has a larger purpose He is accomplishing in our lives and in the world. Not all is as it appears, and sometimes faith is counterintuitive.

C.S. Lewis gives some examples of what this kind of faith looks like in his book *The Last Night.* There he writes: "In getting a dog out of a trap, in extracting a thorn from a child's finger, in teaching a boy to swim or rescuing one who can't, in getting a frightened beginner over a nasty place on a mountain, the one fatal obstacle may be their distrust. We are asking them to trust us in the teeth of their senses, their imagination, and their intelligence. We are asking them to believe that what is painful will relieve their pain and that what looks dangerous is their only safety....Sometimes, because of their unbelief, we can do no mighty works. But if we succeed, we do so because they have maintained their faith in us against apparently contrary evidence. No one blames us for demanding such faith. No one blames them for giving it...."[2]

The people about whom the author of this letter to the Hebrews writes in chapter 11 oriented their whole lives around their confidence in the Lord. Their faith consisted of taking God at His Word, and they believed that what the Lord said He would do, even though at times they had no idea how He was going to fulfill it. These people lived by faith, and they were commended for it.

II. The Key to Faith.

It's important to realize that it's not the *capacity* of one's faith that matters as much as the *object* of that faith which really determines the outcome. The object of one's faith is the key. Let me illustrate what I'm talking about.

Someone gives us a rectangular piece of paper called a check that has some scribblings on it, and we have faith that we can exchange that piece of paper for money from a person's checking account in a bank. Or we make an appointment with someone to meet at a certain time and place, and we have faith that they will show up at the appointed time and at the appointed place. Or we see video of a

tragedy in another part of the world, and we have faith that what the reporter is showing us is true.

In each of these situations, it isn't our capacity for faith, or the amount of faith we may have, but the object of our faith that makes all the difference in the world. I may take a person's check, but if they are a shyster and a fraud, I may be left holding the bag, no matter how much faith I have put in them. I may make an appointment with an individual, but if they're habitually forgetful or tardy, I may be wasting my time, no matter how much faith I have. And I may watch a television report about a current affair, but if the reporter is fabricating the story for higher ratings, I may be deceived, no matter how much faith I place in the broadcast.

The *object* of a person's faith is the key in matters of belief, and Jesus said that a person with faith the size of a mustard seed could move mountains. It isn't the amount of faith you have that matters; it's the object of one's faith that counts. And I would suggest that only God is worthy of your ultimate faith. Only He can bear up under the full weight of your trust. When we believe Him, God can do amazing things.

The rest of the chapter in Hebrews 11 is the story of ordinary people who put their faith in God. Later in the chapter the author writes, *"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again…. The world was not worthy of them…and these were all commended for their faith" (Heb. 11:32-35,38,39).*

The object of your faith is the key, not the size of it. Put your hope in God, and He'll come through for you.

III. Does Faith Really Matter?

When it comes to the Christian life, faith isn't simply an intellectual ascent to a statement of belief. Rather, at its core biblical faith is trust in a person, the Person of Jesus Christ. It's putting the full weight of your confidence and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and believing that He has your best interest at heart, and that He can work all things together for your good.

There are a hundred ways I can demonstrate to you that faith matters in a person's life, and we could be here all day sharing stories of times in our lives when our faith really made a difference. Maybe you would tell me about a time when God came through for you and He provided just what you needed at just the

right time, or even at the last minute. Or you might tell me of a situation when He healed you of an illness, or helped you find your way when you were lost. Or maybe there was a relationship you thought was irreparable, but God did a miracle and healed the brokenness. (Perhaps after the service this morning and when you have lunch with people this afternoon, you can share some of these stories with one another.)

In the time I have left this morning, I want to share with you my own journey of faith and how it has really mattered so much to me in recent months. Since the death of my wife Lorie back in November, I've discovered that my faith has never mattered to me more. I told someone recently that I don't know how people who don't have faith deal with tragedy and loss like this. My faith has been a lifeline to me, and it's enabled me to put one foot in front of another and keep on going. And without my faith, all I would be left with is despair and emptiness and the darkness that comes with loss.

It's my faith in Christ and my hope of heaven and the world to come that has enabled me to look past the awful darkness of Lorie's death and believe that God has a good purpose in all this and that He has a good future for me and my family. My faith has also helped me take the loss into myself and even to be enlarged by it, so that my capacity to live life and to know and trust God more intimately has actually increased.

In the midst of all the tears I've cried, I have felt the nearness of God and His comforting presence in a way that is different than before. And I've been reminded that Jesus wept at the death of His friend Lazarus, and that our heavenly Father Himself knows what it's like to lose someone you love. In these days of grief, I've come to appreciate in a new way that God is my only hope to make it through tough times. And I've actually found myself repeating aloud the words Peter said to Jesus during our Lord's earthly ministry, "Where else can I go, Lord? You have the words of life."

Faith helps you look past the present to a future that is to come. It enables you to see with trusting eyes a time when God will do a new thing and when all will be made right. The promise of heaven is real, and faith in that promise is what has helped sustain me in these dark days.

Last week I read something which verbalized this hope for me. In his book *The Last Thing We Talk About*, Joe Bayly tells the tragic story of losing three sons, each lost at a different age and under different circumstances to death. One child died of leukemia before he was five. Remembering those heartaches, Bayly writes about a time when hope finally returned to his heart.

He writes, "One Saturday morning in January, I saw the mail truck stop at our mailbox up the road. Without thinking, except that I wanted to get the mail, I ran out of the house and up to the road in my shirt sleeves. It was bitterly cold - the

temperature was below zero. There was a brisk wind from the north, and the ground was covered with more than a foot of snow.

"I opened the mailbox, pulled out the mail, and was about to make a mad dash for the house when I saw what was on the bottom, underneath the letters. It was a Burpee seed catalog. On the front were bright zinnias, and on the back were huge tomatoes.

"For a few moments I was oblivious to the cold, delivered from it. I leafed through the catalog, tasting corn and cucumbers, smelling roses. I saw the freshly plowed earth, smelled it, and let it run through my fingers. For those brief moments, I was living in the springtime and summer. Winter was past. Then the cold penetrated to my bones again, and I ran back to the house.

"When the door was closed behind me, and I was getting warm again, I thought how my moments at the mailbox were like our experience as Christians. We feel the cold, along with those who do not share our hope. The biting wind penetrates us as it does them….But in our cold times, we have a seed catalog. We open it and smell the promised spring, the eternal spring. And the firstfruit that settles our hope is Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead and from the cold earth to eternal glory."[3]

C.S. Lewis wrote a poem about the death of his wife Joy. It reads like this:

> Here the whole world (stars, water, air
> And field, and forest, as there were
> Reflected in a single mind)
> Like cast off clothes was left behind
> In ashes, yet with hope that she,
> Re-born from holy poverty
> In Lenten lands, hereafter may
> Resume them on her Easter Day.[4]

Does faith matter? Indeed it does – in life and in death. My faith in Christ is what has sustained me in this time of deep sorrow. What sustains you when you go through times of trial? I pray you will discover a deeper faith in God which can carry you when it's difficult to keep going. He is our only hope.

Conclusion.

To be a person who lives by faith is to be a person who is something of an enigma. In his book *The Root of the Righteous,* A.W. Tozer makes note of this fact when he writes:

> "A real Christian is an odd [person] anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks familiarly every day to Someone he cannot

> see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest, and happiest when he feels the worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passes knowledge."[5]

That's the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews profiles in this great chapter on faith, and it's the kind of faith we're called to develop as followers of Christ, too. Does faith really matter? I believe it does. The question I leave with you this morning is, "Do you?"

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[1]Source unknown.
[2] C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night*, p. 23.
[3] Joseph Bayly, *The Last Thing We Talk About*, pp. 94,95.
[4] C.S. Lewis, *The Quotable Lewis*, p. 337.
[5]A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous,* p. 156.