

**EASTER 2018**  
**RESPONDING TO GOD**

Hebrews 11:1-6

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. 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.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Easter is one week away. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ one week from today. I want to ask, “What do we do for Easter?” It’s an interesting question in my house because we are empty nesters for the first time. My wife and I looked at one another just a week or two ago and said, “Wow, I think Easter Sunday it’s going to be just the two of us.” That was a question I asked, wondering, “Are you going to cook? Are we going out for Easter Sunday? What are we going to do?” It’s just such a new experience for us. No one feel sorry for me at all, alright? It’s such a new experience for us as empty nesters, thinking about what we will do. That is not what I’m talking about when I’m asking, “What we will do for Easter?” I’m not talking about what your plans will be. Hopefully you’ll be here for one of our services. I’m not talking about where you’ll eat that day or who you’ll spend time with.

But we are worshipping God in light of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, wherein we find the complete forgiveness of our sins. We find the gift of eternal life. We receive abundant life, the presence of the Spirit of God in our lives right now, and the promise of eternity – new heavens and a new earth – how will we respond to God in light of what God has done? What will we do? What will we do for Easter? How will we worship God? How will we follow God? What will this week look like? Maybe

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## Easter 2018 – Responding to God

Hebrews 11:1-6 | Sunday, March 25, 2018 | By Brian Brookins



we could ask the question another way: What does God want from you this week? What does God want from you every week? What does God want from you every day? What pleases God?

The answer to that question in one word is: Faith. “And without faith...” Hebrews 11:6 “...it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Last week we talked about receiving from God. In some ways we were trying to establish a road map – an understanding of how we relate to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We wanted to aggressively, really head-on address this very prominent misconception – that we pray and that we read our Bibles, and we do all these things because we are giving to God, we are providing a religious service. To whatever degree that’s true, it’s a secondary truth, because fundamentally we receive from God. Salvation is a gift. God’s word comes to us in power. The Spirit of God comes to us in power. We fellowship with God and we receive from God, then we return to him worship.

Many times we are just fundamentally off. We lack grace and strength to seek the Lord, because we think we have to earn our way in to the presence of God, rather than understanding it’s by grace. If you missed last week’s message, it’s a bit awkward recommending my own message, but I recommend it. I think you should hear it. I wouldn’t have preached it otherwise, I hope.

I don’t like this word, but I’m going to use it because it’s descriptive of what we try to do. Last week we tried to lay in the mechanics of how we relate to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, beginning with how we honor God by receiving from him all that we need. We live in dependence upon God.

I want to take that conversation further today and say, “Okay, so God gives. We begin with God. We begin with God the Father. We see his plan. We see his love. All that we need we receive through the Son. We receive grace by faith in Jesus. And the Holy Spirit is manifesting that right now in us and through us. Father, Son, Holy Spirit -- I’m receiving. But what do I do? What is it that God wants me to do in that moment? What’s the first step that I take? It’s faith. It’s the first step. It’s the second step. It’s the third step.

Perhaps you are saying, “Well, we act, right?” Yes, but all of that flows from trusting in God. So we want to explore this response to God, our response – a response of faith. Everything we do we do by faith. And for this purpose, I began by reading verses 1-6, because here are just a few of the things that are alluded to, either directly or indirectly in this portion of scripture.

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Faith is how I do everything, according to this chapter. Faith is the way that I am commended. Faith is the way that I worship God. Faith is the way that I offer sacrifice to God that is acceptable. Faith is the way I live a meaningful life. Faith is the way I leave a lasting legacy. Faith is the way I see God. Faith is the way that I face death. Faith is the way that I save my family. Faith is the way that I show the world God's salvation. Faith is the way I obey God. Faith is the way I do hard things. Faith is the way I grow and am transformed and changed. Faith is the way that I'm declared right with God. Faith is the way I'm forgiven. Faith is the way that I fulfill my life purpose. I receive from God and my response is trust. It's faith. It's confidence in God. It's very difficult to overstate the importance of trusting in God.

You remember from last week, if you were here, how we said that instead of starting with everything created, we want to start with God. We want to come to a passage of scripture and say, "What does this passage teach me about God and God's love and what God is doing and God's plan?" As soon as we get a little glimpse of who God is, then a churning starts within, in terms of all the things that need to happen - how I'm not right with God, how I'm not righteous.

You see this throughout scripture. You see the great example of Peter, where he is fishing and Jesus says to throw the net on the other side. This is just an insult to a fisherman, to tell him how to fish. He has been out there all night fishing. So he throws the net on the other side and there is this tremendous, supernatural catch. Peter's response is to fall down before Christ and say, "I am unworthy." You see the same thing recorded in Isaiah chapter 6, where he has this glorious vision of God. We begin with God. When we see God, most often our immediate response as in the case of Isaiah is: "Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

So, I begin with God. I begin to sense immediately my need. And this is what we drew attention to last week. We can go either way. At that point we can go the way of our own works, of our own righteousness - "Okay, I've got to clean my life up. I've got to do better. I want to be accepted by God." And many times that's what prayer and scripture reading looks like. "Okay, God expects this. God wants this. I've got to do it," when the correct biblical response is to say, "Okay, Lord, you clean me up. You have offered your Son for my sin, as a sacrifice to make me right with you, and I receive by faith in Jesus Christ -- grace."

Faith, our subject here in this scripture, is how we do that. Faith is what pleases God. Faith is how we are made right with God as we trust in Jesus.

My goal in today's message is to give you something like faith steroids – just a boost of faith. I want to boost your faith. I want to encourage your faith. I want to strengthen your faith. If I could do it, I want to increase your faith. And of course the way I will attempt to do that is to just give you the promises, give you the word of God. Because Romans 10:17 tells us that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.” Our faith is increased as we see Christ in the word of God, as we hear the promises of God in scripture.

Charles Bridges said, “All our failures may be ultimately traced to a defect of faith.” These are the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:29: “According to your faith be it done to you.” This is the way grace works in our lives. Jesus, here in this particular passage, is speaking to two blind men that are seeking healing. He calls attention to their response – that he desires a response of faith. Mark 9:23: “All things are possible for one who believes.” Faith comes by hearing. Look at Luke 17:5-6. Perhaps you can relate to the apostles' question here. They come to Jesus and they say, “Jesus, increase our faith! We want more faith. If faith is what pleases God and faith is how we receive from God, then how do I get more faith?” Would you like to know how to get more faith?

Well, Jesus' response is curious. The Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” This response of Jesus is mystifying, because it seems to me as if it's a rebuke. It seems like he is saying that if you just had a little bit of faith, then you could do arbitrary things like just throw a tree into the ocean.

Doesn't that provoke all kinds of questions? Jesus refused to use his power in that way. He's not telling us to just randomly and arbitrarily... You know, “I don't want to get up for the remote. I'm going to believe for it to come to me.” I'm pretty sure that's not the application of faith that God is looking for. I think the right way to understand this passage is that Jesus did exactly what they asked for. He spoke his word to them and produced faith. In other words, he spoke this truth: Don't let your focus be on the quantity of your faith. Let your focus be on God. Let your faith be in God.

This is going to seem like a contradiction to this entire message, but it's an important qualifier. Our faith is in God, not in our faith. He says to just use the little bit of faith you have. It's really powerful.

Get your eyes on God. Let his word, his promises fill you up. Faith comes. “Be it unto you as your faith.” Faith comes by hearing.

Again, Charles Bridges: “Difficulties heaped upon difficulties can never rise to the level of the promises of God.” This is powerful. We want to live according to the circumstances which encapsulate us, but the promises of God take us higher. God desires to give you a new life today. “Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creation.”

It’s really, I think, the message of Palm Sunday. Jesus enters into Jerusalem. Palm branches are thrown in front of him as an emblem of his royalty, as a symbol of his exaltation. He is hailed as a king: “Hosanna, Lord save us!” And yet, it’s a hollow praise, because people are praising God, asking him to save them according to their own plan of salvation. And God’s response to that is: “What I have for you is so much deeper and so much greater and so much more significant. Will you have faith? Will you trust me that my kingdom is greater than your kingdom? That my blessing is greater than your blessing? Will you trust in me?” So we know that the scene that is praising Jesus on Palm Sunday is crucifying Jesus on Friday.

Many times our entire understanding of prayer and Bible study and worship is off because we are trying to pray. We are trying to read the Bible because we want to get God just to fill our agenda. It’s not that we shouldn’t take our agenda before God. We do. We take everything before God in prayer, but it’s faith to trust that what he has for us is so awesome. So, three points today:

- I. Faith pleases God.
- II. Faith draws near to God.
- III. Faith is rewarded.

Let’s start with:

- I. Faith pleases God.

Without faith it is impossible to please him.” At the end of our elders meeting just a week ago, after going through all of our discussions, we wrote out on the white board 12 prayer goals, 12 prayer targets. We said, “God, in light of all of this discussion, in light of what we believe you are doing, in light of all that we need as a church, we are asking you for this, and we are asking you to

do this. We are seeking you.” You would find spiritual things on this list, physical things, material things, people things – all kinds of requests that we are taking before God.

I wrote them out, took a picture, got into my prayer time on Monday, and opened that picture and I’m going through those requests. And a little voice popped up and said, “This is really your leadership plan? You are praying for miracles?” You could hear the mocking. We need to know that faith pleases God, that God responds to your requests with pleasure, and that his church is built by prayer, that the family is built by prayer, that your life is built by prayer, and that we receive by trusting in God. True faith always propels us into a place of obedience. It’s a trust that permeates and goes deep into our souls. It results in action.

I had an occurrence, and I apologize for this illustration because it probably makes me look better than I am, but I kind of prefer that. I live on a golf course. Please don’t misunderstand that. I used to apologize for that and say, “Well, it’s not a great golf course. It’s not a big house.” It’s an amazing house on an amazing golf course in an amazing city. It’s incredible. It’s worth millions and millions of dollars. Most of that’s not true. But I was walking one day and a neighbor picked me up. My kids at the time all worked at the golf course and played there. This man that I hardly know was saying to me, “Brian, your kids are really remarkable.” He was sincerely blessing me for what he saw in my kids. He asked, “How did you do it?”

Now, if you know my kids you know that they’re remarkable. But you also know that they are sinners and all those qualifiers. But in that moment, this is really what came to mind: “I just prayed a lot.” Now, I’ve tried to do what God would have me to do, but I honestly before God believe that whatever is right there is by God’s grace. He gave me an amazing wife, and by God’s grace he has answered prayer after prayer. I could stand here all day just voicing testimonies of how in a moment of crisis, in a moment of disaster, God averted tragedy. And it is God’s grace today that I have six amazing kids that serve the Lord as young adults. I want to tell you: Live your life by prayer. Live your life by faith. If your life is on a parallel track and you are saying, “Well, I did that and my kids aren’t serving the Lord,” I want to tell you to trust God. It pleases him to keep asking. Don’t give up.

There are days when I think, “Wow, with six kids there’s always one that you think is about to go off track. They never fail to keep my prayer life in full gear. So friends, you understand the vulnerability in sharing that personal illustration -- that this week one of my kids could just have a terrible failure.

I pray that that not happen. I don't want to elevate myself, but I do want you to know that faith pleases God. Pray about that which is most important to you.

One of the requests that the elders are bringing before the Lord (I told you that some of these requests are just audacious) -- we are praying for \$5 million to pay off this debt and remodel the building. I'm not interested so much in remodeling the building for just a better look or new carpet, but functionally changing the building to better minister to children, better minister to youth, create community areas where we can reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ and build.

I don't have any intention to go on a fundraising campaign for \$5 million. I don't. Some of you are smiling right now, saying, "Oh, wow." But I want to believe God. And you know what? I may be Abraham. I may not be the one who enters into that Promised Land, but I can believe God for it. I may be. I may live to be 120 and still be the pastor of this church! Having kids at 100! Okay, we're off topic here.

Please see in the verses that lead up to verse 6, this theme is building. Go to verse 4. "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable..." Notice the various ways that faith is described as pleasing to God, as acceptable by God or to God, commended by God. "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks." That's the expression of a lasting legacy.

"By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him." Faith pleases God.

William Carey: "Expect great things; attempt great things." Thomas Scott is an interesting individual. He was an Anglican pastor, Anglican priest. He was converted as a pastor, corresponding in letters to John Newton. Scott wrote to one of his sons: "I must be allowed to think that we have not success because we ask not and do not stir up others to expect and ask the blessing from God alone." Faith pleases God. Faith is the way that we relate to God.

## II. Faith draws near to God.

“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe.” The point here is parallel to the first. Pleasing God and drawing near to God are presented in the structure as synonyms. So this is a helpful reference for us, especially as it relates to our Easter celebration. On the cross, Jesus was mocked in many ways. Leading up to and on the cross, he was rejected. He suffered shame. Our shame, our sin, our rejection was placed upon him so that his righteousness might be placed upon us, so that his acceptance might be placed upon us. And on the cross, one of the ways that Jesus was mocked was in Mark 15:29-30: “And those who passed by derided him (Jesus), wagging their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’”

They are referencing a prophecy that Jesus gave about the destruction of the temple. But as he gave that prophecy, he said that the temple would be destroyed in three days, and then raised up, which obviously for this massive building in the first century was an impossibility. But Jesus was teaching us something very significant, very important – that his body, his life – that Jesus himself is the temple. He is the place where we meet God. He is the place where we experience God’s presence. And we receive that by grace. So he was prophesying that this structure is no longer going to be the meeting place for God. But, “You are going to meet God in me.”

Then, as Jesus is crucified, still in Mark 15, verses 37 and 38: “And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” In the temple there was the Most Holy Place – the sacred place of God’s presence. People were not allowed into the Most Holy Place. Only once a year the High Priest would go in to make atonement for sin. He would offer sacrifice for his own sin, enter in once a year. The curtain separating the Most Holy Place from the other courts of the temple, upon Jesus’ crucifixion, was torn in two, declaring that the pathway into the very presence of God is now open to you and me through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God invites us to draw near.

We read this earlier in the service in worship: Hebrews 14, 15 and 16. “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to God, to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need. The invitation here is not to view God as just a place where we receive material things or tangible things. It’s a place where we take everything to God and we pour out our heart before the Lord in prayer. The promise of scripture is that he hears us, that he sympathizes with our needs and weaknesses.

Sometimes we come to God and say, “Lord, I know I’ve been taught now that I need to begin with God, yet I am opening this scripture, or I’m looking at my life and I’m looking at things and I don’t know what you are doing. I don’t see you. There is a poverty of spirit that I find myself so distracted by everything else.” Pour that out to the Lord and say, “God, have mercy on me and help me. Open the eyes of my heart that I might see you and draw near to you.”

For me, it’s just so refreshing to be able to share the most intimate details of the struggles of my soul before the Lord in prayer and then watch how he brings his promises to bear on those weaknesses. Draw near to the Lord.

### III. Faith is rewarded.

This is really the logic of the verse. This is what boosts our faith. The author of Hebrews is saying to us, “Who is going to draw near to God? Who is going to trust him? Who is going to believe in him? Who is going to pray if they don’t believe that God will reward that activity?” For me, when I say to the elders, “Let’s pray. Let’s believe God for this audacious goal of \$5 million,” there are subsequent conversations that take place in my heart before the Lord. They go something like this: “God, you know how prone I am to trust in material things. You know that of all the sins of my life, this may be the most powerful, the most dangerous for me – the temptation to trust in financial security.”

I don’t often try to rank my sin, because it’s a very long list, but this is a powerful foe. I don’t think I’m unique in that. I want to just tell you that I think we live in a place where we experience those dangers. So we come with one hand saying, “Lord, provide everything I need.” But in another hand we say, “Guard my heart. Guard my heart from the love of money.” I just say, “Lord, let my heart be so guarded that you give me lots of money.”

Now, almost assuredly, if you begin to pray and open your heart before the Lord, the fear will come: “If I really ask God to sort all this out, he’s going to make me devastatingly poor. He’s going to take everything from me. He’s going to make me live where I don’t want to live, go where I don’t want to go, do what I don’t want to do.” “And without faith, it is impossible to please God. Anyone who would draw near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him.”

So, the idea that your loving heavenly Father would use the opportunity of you surrendering and opening your heart to him to punish you is unbiblical, ungodly and demonic. Was that strong enough? But it's the temptation we all face. It's the same temptation that Eve faced, that Adam faced. "If I really follow God, he'll hold out on me." I want to tell you: Come to God and trust him. His life for you is better than your life for you. It is not anything like the life that you think you want. It does involve sacrifice. It does involve difficulty.

When you read, for example, John 15 where Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me," there are two options.

- 1) He says, "If you don't abide in me and you don't bear fruit, you will be cut off and cast into the fire. Not a good option.
- 2) The second option is: "If you abide in me and produce fruit, I'm going to prune you." Not a great option, but better than option 1.

Look at your life. No matter how much you have or don't have, life can be difficult.

Now that my children are emerging into adulthood, I often have this conversation: "Son, it doesn't get better. Learn to live by faith. Learn to trust in God. Learn that the circumstances of your life, though you take them to God constantly, cannot bring you the joy that your heart longs for. It's a false God and it will not bring life."

As we conclude, let me just say this. We want to respond this week in faith, trusting the Lord. That's what God wants from us. We often express that through prayer, and we soon discover that as we do that, there is a surrender involved where I really am being stretched to trust God for something different than what I was initially asking for. And it's a reward, not a punishment. Amen?

Let's pray.