

1. faith, hope, love

“And without faith it is impossible to please God...”
Hebrews 11:6

Faith is one of those basic ingredients of the Christian faith. And yet we don't often stop to consider what it really means to *have faith*. In this study we'll be looking at one of the great chapters on faith in the bible – Hebrews 11 – to see what we can learn about the type of faith we need to have to please God. But before we do this, let's look at what the gospel of John has to say about faith.

A. faith in Jesus

The Gospel of John gives us a lot of dialogue from Jesus, so this seems like a good place to look if we want to hear what Jesus had to say about having faith. Here are some of the things Jesus said about believing...

3:16 "God...gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
3:18 Whoever *believes* in him is not condemned
3:36 Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."
6:29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent."
5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and *believes* him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.
6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who *believes* in me will never be thirsty.
6:40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and *believes* in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."
6:47 I tell you the truth, he who *believes* has everlasting life.
7:38 Whoever *believes* in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.
11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who *believes* in me will live, even though he dies"
12:44 Then Jesus cried out, "When a man *believes* in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.
12:46 I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who *believes* in me should stay in darkness."

Believing in Jesus is absolutely central to what it means to be a Christian – a follower of Jesus. But how does believing in Jesus actually work? At a simple level, an analogy is if you were to be badly hurt by one of your friends (e.g. verbal or emotional abuse). A 'pain barrier' has been created to block your relationship; something has to be done with that pain if you are to restore the friendship. Even if you

said 'it doesn't matter', you would still have to do something with the pain inflicted by your friend – either pass that pain back to her (retribution) or absorb the pain yourself.

When we broke relationship with God, that caused God great pain, and his options were the same...gain retribution or absorb the pain. God chose to absorb the pain and he demonstrated this through Jesus' death on the cross.

Believing in Jesus is to accept God's offer of eliminating the barrier between us.

- share stories about how you came to believe in Jesus and what 'believing in Jesus' means to you.

B. heroes of the faith

one of the great chapters on the heroes of the faith is Hebrews 11. We've printed it over the page for you.

the prep

Read Hebrews 11 by yourself (or in pairs) and note down or underline any bits that give you insights into what type of faith we're meant to have i.e. how should it affect the way we think or feel or live?

Take 5 or so minutes and then share your observations with the group

some questions

- Your identity (or how you view yourself) seems to be a factor for these heroes (e.g. 11:13-16) How do *you* primarily identify yourself? (a good test is to think about how you introduce yourself to someone new)
- Do you think it would make any difference to the way you lived if God was your primary reference point for identity? If so, how?
- 'Seeing the invisible' (e.g. 11:27) is another factor of faith, and yet this can be very difficult. Together brainstorm as many ways as you can that might help you 'see' and 'feel' the love of an invisible God (e.g. praying and reading as though you're in a conversation with God)
- The faith of these heroes also affected in very concrete ways the actions they took. Assuming we all find it hard to *act out* our faith, what are some things we could do to help each other?
- We often have 'heroes' or people we like to emulate in different areas of our lives. If Jesus is like a hero for you, what are some of the things about him that you would like to emulate?

Hebrews 11:1 12:13

11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 3 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. 4 By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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 comes by faith. 8 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. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 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. 13 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. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 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. 17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. 20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones. 23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. 26 He regarded disgrace

for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.

31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 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. 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Tying it all together

As you've gone through this, you've probably gone on a few tangents, raised a few questions, and struck some helpful food for thought.

As a group, summarise...

- what you discussed
- things that really impacted and/or challenged you
- unanswered questions
- practical things that you may do as a result of going through this stuff.

It'd be great to finish off by praying together, because we don't want this to merely be an intellectual exercise. God needs to help work this *faith* into our lives.

2. faith, hope, love

*“Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who **hope** in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint...”*

Isaiah 40:30-31

Hope is a great sustainer, giving meaning and purpose in life to all who have something to hope in. And yet, although *hope* drives us on in our actions, most of us find it difficult to articulate what it is exactly that we hope for. These deep longings are hidden deep within us.

And what about the Christian hope? Sure, we have some vague notion of heaven, but what does it *really* mean? Let's ask the question...

A. the Christian hope

the prep

to start with we want you to do some work on your own on this. This will help us be 'on the same page' when it comes to the discussion, and it gives us a better chance of engaging and really getting into the topic.

- read the passages in the right column of this page
- underline or note the bits that you think are core to what followers of Jesus hope *in* (take 5 or so minutes to do this)
- when everyone is ready, come up with a group list of key aspects of the Christian hope

Some questions

- From these passages you can come up with quite an impressive list. Have you ever stopped to think about the expansiveness of our hope? what are your reactions to what God promises will happen in the future? (surprise, relief, disbelief...)
- People who most often look forward to the 'new' are those who struggle in some way with the 'existing' (eg illness, relationship problems, unhappy life-it's easy to see why this is such good news to the poor and needy) Generally speaking, do you long for the 'new' future or are you happy with the existing?
- If we believe Jesus is coming back and God is going to make everything new (as described in these passages), how should this impact the way we live? In all honesty, does it affect the way you live today? Why is it difficult to put into practice?

Jn 14:2-6

2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

1Thes 4:13-5:11

4:13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words.

5:1 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, 2 for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... 9 For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Revelation 21:1-4

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men and women, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

B. Assurance of hope

This hope of rising from the dead, getting a new body, being in blissful happiness with God forever, never experiencing any more pain or suffering...it all sounds too good to be true! So what assurances do we have that this is going to happen?

1. First and foremost it hangs on the belief that **Jesus himself rose from the dead**. He could only rise from the dead if God accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. So if he rose, then so will we who believe...

1Cor 15:12-20

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ... 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. 20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

2. Secondly, we get the **Spirit** as a downpayment by God, giving us the security of knowing that 'full payment' will be made by God at the end of life...

1Cor 1:20-22

20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. 21 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, 22 set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

3. We also have the **bible**, showing God's dealings with people over thousands of years. As we *carefully* read and *enter into* the stories of old, we get a feel for what God is like - that He won't let us down...

Rom 15:4

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The bible also directly reminds us why we should be assured of what God will do...

1John 5:11-13

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

4. And of course we have **one another** to share stories of what God has been doing with us, and to generally encourage each other on in our way...

1Thes 4:17-18, 5:10-11

And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage each other with these words...

10 He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

So can we have a 'cast-iron' guarantee of what we hope for? No. As we saw last week in Hebrews 11:1...

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

We are called to live by faith...

C. Practical stuff

- We all have our 'wobbly' moments, when we are no longer so sure about our faith and what we are hoping for. How could we practically incorporate the assurances just mentioned into our lives to keep us going during these hard times?
- It's hard to live today while holding onto the perspective of what God will eventually do in the future. What are some practical things that might help us keep a future perspective that really does impact the way we live today?

Tying it all together

As you've gone through this, you've probably gone on a few tangents, raised a few questions, and struck some helpful food for thought.

As a group, summarise... what you discussed; things that really impacted and/or challenged you; unanswered questions; practical things that you may do as a result of going through this stuff.

Finish by praying together, because this isn't merely an intellectual exercise. God needs to make this *hope* real to us.

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

1Cor 15:51-58

3. faith, hope, love

“and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing...” 1Cor 13:2

Love. A word often used but not well-defined. In fact, for many of us we have probably almost become ‘immune’ to the word because through over-use it has lost any real depth of meaning. So what does it mean that God loves us and asks us to love one another? Let’s see if we can scratch below the surface ...

A. Love... with reckless generosity

Spend a few minutes by yourself reading the passage and comments below before answering the questions over.

Mat 5:43-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy’. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

What does this mean?

The Pharisees had a narrow view of the command to ‘love your neighbour’ and using their own version of logic invented the inverse command to ‘hate your enemy’.

But Jesus flatly disagreed with this. He called his followers to actively seek the best interests of those we don’t like, of those we find obnoxious and selfish, even of those who try to make our lives a misery (see previous verses Mat 5:38-42).

Why should we act this way? Jesus says because you will then be following the example set by your Father in heaven, who gives sunshine and rain to both the good and the evil. Lots of people hate God and rage against him in total defiance. But God is so patient with them. He continues to keep their hearts beating, giving them fun and laughter as well as hard times. In fact, *the way God treats those who hate him appears to be no different to the way he treats those who love him.* They have the same lot given to them. If we stop to think about it, this seems utterly ridiculous. But it is not bad news to those who love God; rather it is good news to those who hate him and who fail him. We often talk about the unconditional love of God. Well, this is what it means. *God doesn’t wait to see how evil people like us will respond before he loves us. He just goes on and does it.* As far as love is concerned, God goes on the offensive. He is not efficient, he just throws his love away. He is too reckless, and bound to get hurt in the process. But that seems to be a price he is willing to pay. God is utterly unreasonable. He does more than he should. He treats us in ways we just don’t deserve to be treated... *“For God so loved the world that*

he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” John 3:16

- If you dared to believe that God could love you so recklessly and unconditionally, how might it make a difference to the way you lived out an average day?
- As you think of some of your friends who don’t yet know God, how do you think it might make a difference for them to know that God loves them so recklessly and unconditionally?

B. Love... according to Jesus

Have a look over the page at the section entitled ‘*some passages taken from the gospel of John*’. Read through the verses as you consider the following questions.

- Jesus told his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. How did Jesus show people that he loved them?
- When showing love to someone, do you think Jesus’ words or his actions were more important?
- Is love just a matter of saying the right words and doing the right actions?

In Jn 13:35 Jesus says

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”

In Jn 17:23 Jesus says

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”

and in 1John 4:12 it says this:

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

We’re told that the invisible God mysteriously becomes visible to the people around us when we love one another and live in unity. And above all else, Jesus emphasises love as the most important thing for his followers – both receiving love from God and passing that love on to others. This is at the heart (so to speak) of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Here’s a couple of questions for you to consider...

- In an average day of relating to people, how often would you consciously be motivated by love or doing good for others?
- Love and concern for others easily gets lost in the busyness of a day. What are some practical things we could do to keep it to the front of our thinking?

C. Practical love

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. 1Cor 13:4-8

- What are some practical ways that we can help one another to receive God's love and to give it to those around us?
- How can we stop all our 'good deeds' from becoming just a chore? What things can help us keep true to the spirit of what Jesus was on about?

The following was said of Martin Luther King at his funeral:

"If any man knew the meaning of suffering, (Martin Luther) King knew. House bombed; living day by day for 13 years under constant threats of death; maliciously accused of being a communist; falsely accused of being insincere; stabbed by a member of his own race; slugged in a hotel lobby; jailed over 20 times; occasionally deeply hurt because friends betrayed him - and yet this man had no bitterness in his heart, no rancour in his soul, no revenge in his mind; and he went up and down the length and breadth of this world preaching non-violence and the redemptive power of love"

Tying it all together:

faith hope and love

As you've gone through these 3 studies on faith, hope and love, hopefully you've been prompted to think about how this all works out in your life.

As a group, it'd be good to share...

- new things you've learnt
- things you've been encouraged by
- things you've been challenged by
- unanswered questions you still have
- and any practical things that you may want to do as a result of going through this stuff.

Finish by praying together, because this isn't merely an intellectual exercise. Following Jesus is all about faith, hope and love lived out in our lives – and to do this we desperately need God's help

Some passages from the Gospel of John

John 13

¹ It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. ² The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him...

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them..."

³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." ³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

John 15

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

John 17

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵ "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."