

## 9<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

80% of the people in the world today who are being persecuted are Christians. Whether it is Nigeria, North Korea, China, Indonesia, the Sudan, Egypt, many other Middle Eastern countries and even some European ones, it goes on. Christians are targeted for opposition, mistreatment - and worse, simply because they are Christian. Some have to meet in secret with lookouts posted. Some are afraid to look after their livestock, open their shop each morning, take their children to school, go to the mall, for fear of their lives.

It's been like that from the earliest days of Christianity.

And many of the letters in the New Testament are written because Christians are being persecuted.

None of us likes to be thought different, to be excluded, to be treated differently from everyone else.

So the desire is always to conform, to try and blot out the difference between us and other people. Or to give up what makes us different. We want the opposition, the different treatment to stop.

In the case of the young church the letter to the Hebrews was sent to, they had felt this pressure very strongly. Some of them had had their homes taken from them; many had been ridiculed in public; they had endured great suffering.

And the pressure was to turn away from Christ, to give up the cause of their suffering – belonging to Jesus.

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Just before our Epistle reading for today the writer says: “We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.”

“We belong to those who have faith and are saved”

That’s you and me, too, you know, if we trust Jesus.

But what does it mean to “have faith”?

Most people think it’s a feeling which you either have or you don’t.

Many think it’s the opposite of science, the enemy of clear thinking.

But this reading defines it and uses it in a very different way.

It’s more like certainty, being sure, that shows itself in action.

Think of it like this. All of us – apart from myself – have faith in the chairs or pews we are sitting on.

They held our weight last week, and there’s no reason they think they won’t hold us up today.

We might know who made them and that they have passed certain Australian standards for chairs or pews. So, we have put our faith in the chairs or pews and acted – we’ve sat down on them.

If we understand that, we understand Christian faith – faith in God.

A much better explanation is the one we find in our Epistle.

*Faith is being sure of what we hope for. It is being certain of what we do not see.*

Notice it says – being sure, being certain.

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But listen to this:

*<sup>3</sup>We have faith. So we understand that everything was made when God commanded it. That's why we believe that what we see was not made out of what could be seen. <sup>1</sup>*

Of course we look back to the very beginning and we believe that God spoke and everything that now is came into being. It was created – by God.

Why does that need faith? NOT because it seems to be against science – it's not.

But we were not there. Only God was. Nothing or nobody else. And he tells us that he spoke, commanded, and it all came into being. It doesn't say how long it took, how it actually happened and so on. It tells us it came about by the command of God.

We take God on trust. We take him at his word. And we act.

Because his word is clear that he created all things, we trust him. We live for him. We love him. We have faith in him.

Indeed the writer now goes on to show us how this has always been the way faith works. It always takes God on trust, because of the evidence – and acts in obedience to him.

The first “person of long ago” is Abraham, the great patriarch.

Listen as I read again:

*<sup>8</sup>Abraham had faith. So he obeyed God. God called him to go to a place he would later receive as his own. So he went. He did it even though he didn't know where he was going. <sup>9</sup>Because of his faith he made his home in the land God had promised him. He was like an outsider in a strange country. He lived there in tents. So did Isaac and Jacob. They*

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<sup>1</sup> [New International Reader's Version](#). (1998). (1st ed., Heb 11:1–3). Zondervan.

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*received the same promise he did. <sup>10</sup>Abraham was looking forward to the city that has foundations. He was waiting for the city that God planned and built.*

Abraham's faith, his trust in God, meant the most extraordinary changes. God made a promise of a land of his own. And even though he lived in it for a while, he and his offspring never saw God keep his promise. Did he lose his faith?

The answer is clear.

It goes on:

*<sup>11</sup>Abraham had faith. So God made it possible for him to become a father. He became a father even though he was too old. Sarah also was too old to have children. But Abraham believed that the One who made the promise was faithful. <sup>12</sup>Abraham was past the time when he could have children. But many children came from that one man. They were as many as the stars in the sky. They were as many as the sand on the seashore. No one could count them.*

God promised a childless 100 year old man and his 80 year old wife countless descendants. Was this just a cruel joke? Sarah laughed when she heard the promise, but Abraham trusted God. He had sex with his wife – and the family was begun.

And that pattern of hearing and trusting the promise of God and not doubting the God but obeying him who made them continued:

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*<sup>13</sup>All those people were still living by faith when they died. They didn't receive the things God had promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a long way off. They openly said that they were outsiders and strangers on earth.*

*<sup>14</sup>People who say things like that show that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup>What if they had been thinking of the country they had left? Then they could have returned to it. <sup>16</sup>Instead, they longed for a better country. They wanted one in heaven<sup>2</sup>  
So God is pleased when they call him their God. In fact, he has prepared a city for them.*

We'll hear more of this next week.

But here's the take home for us.

Putting our trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is worth it. Abraham and his descendants had nowhere near the amount of evidence that says God is trustworthy that we do.

Faith in the true and living God, trust in his promises and obeying his commands has been proven again and again down the centuries to be the firmest anchor we can have.

And trusting him is the wisest and best thing we can do

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<sup>2</sup> [\*New International Reader's Version\*](#). (1998). (1st ed., Heb 11:8–16). Zondervan.