

Living by Faith, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: What Is Faith? Assurance and Conviction

Hebrews 11:1-3

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This opening lesson carries real doctrinal weight, because how a class understands the word 'faith' will shape everything else in this study. Hebrews 11:1 gives us a definition rather than a mood. The two key terms, 'assurance' (hupostasis, a word for substance or a firm foundation) and 'conviction' (elegchos, a word for proof or evidence), tell us that faith is not blind optimism but a confident resting on what God has revealed. What is doctrinally at stake here is the difference between biblical faith and two counterfeits: a sentimental, content-free 'faith in faith,' and a bare intellectual assent that never bends the life toward obedience. Verse 3 anchors faith in the spoken word of God, which sets up a theme that runs through the whole chapter and through our heritage: faith rests on God's revelation, and it comes by hearing that word (Romans 10:17).

Be ready to make two clarifications. First, faith is not opposed to evidence or reason; it is conviction grounded in the trustworthy testimony and promises of God. Second, the faith Hebrews praises is always a living, acting faith. The very next verses will say 'by faith Abel offered,' 'by faith Noah prepared,' 'by faith Abraham obeyed and went.' Plant that seed now. The faith that saves is trust that obeys, and the rest of the chapter will demonstrate it again and again. This guards the class from a 'faith only' notion that the rest of the New Testament will not allow (James 2:24).

At the same time, this lesson is aimed at the heart and not only the head. Many sincere believers carry a quiet anxiety about whether their faith is 'enough.' The goal is to move students from a faith that fluctuates with feelings to a faith that rests on the unchanging word of God. Teach in a way that builds assurance: God's promises are solid ground, and a trembling hand can still hold firmly to a strong rope. Help each student name where they are being called to lean their weight on God this week.

Question 1

Student Question: *Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' What do the words 'assurance' and 'conviction' tell us about the nature of true faith, and how does this differ from a vague hope that something might turn out well?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the words themselves, because the definition is doing careful work. The word translated 'assurance' is *hupostasis*, which carries the sense of substance, foundation, or that which stands under and holds something up. Faith gives present substance to things still future. The word translated 'conviction' is *elegchos*, a term used for proof or evidence that settles a matter. Together they tell us that faith is not a hopeful mood; it is a confident certainty that treats God's promises as solid reality.

Press the contrast with how the world uses the word. Modern usage often makes 'faith' mean believing without reasons, or hoping hard against the odds. Biblical faith is the opposite of groundless. It is well-founded confidence because of who has made the promise. The certainty does not come from the strength of our feelings but from the trustworthiness of God's character and word.

Help the class feel the practical weight of this. A person who merely hopes something might work out is tossed by every change in circumstance. A person who has assurance can be steady in the dark, because their confidence rests on something outside themselves. This is why the chapter can hold up suffering saints alongside triumphant ones. Their circumstances differed wildly; their assurance in God did not.

Connect forward. This definition is the lens for the whole chapter. Every example will show faith acting on God's word before the promise was visible. Make sure the class hears that faith and certainty belong together, so that no one leaves thinking biblical faith is a shaky guess.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical definition of faith as confident assurance, not wishful thinking or blind belief
- Faith grounded in the trustworthy character and word of God rather than in human feeling
- The difference between biblical faith and a content-free 'faith in faith'
- Faith as the present possession of future and unseen realities
- Assurance as a settled posture available to every believer, not only the spiritually elite

Discussion Prompts

- What is the practical difference between hoping something works out and having assurance in God?
- Why is it important that the certainty of faith rests on God rather than on the strength of our feelings?
- Where have you seen steady faith hold someone firm when their circumstances were shaking?

Question 2

Student Question: *Be honest with yourself for a moment. When you think about your own walk with God, does your faith feel more like settled assurance or like anxious hoping? What might be feeding the difference?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and the aim is honest reflection rather than guilt. Many believers live with a low-grade anxiety about their standing with God, and naming it is the first step toward the assurance Hebrews offers. Create a climate where people can admit that their faith sometimes feels thin without fearing they will be judged for it.

Help students trace the causes. Anxious faith is often fed by resting on the wrong foundation: our performance, our emotions, our circumstances, or comparison with others. Settled faith grows when we relocate our confidence onto God's promises and finished work. The question is not 'How strong do I feel?' but 'How trustworthy is the One I am trusting?'

Move the conversation toward hope and growth. Assurance is not a personality trait reserved for naturally confident people; it is the fruit of feeding on God's word (Romans 10:17) and remembering His faithfulness. Encourage the class that even a weak faith laid on a strong Savior is saving faith. The goal is steady growth, not instant perfection.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between resting on God's promises and resting on personal performance or feelings
- Honest self-examination as a healthy part of the Christian life (2 Corinthians 13:5)
- Assurance as the fruit of feeding on God's word and remembering His faithfulness
- The danger of measuring faith by the intensity of emotion
- Comfort for the believer with a weak but real faith laid on a strong Savior

Discussion Prompts

- What tends to feed anxiety in your walk with God, and what tends to steady it?
- How might relocating your confidence from your feelings to God's promises change this week?
- What is one habit that has actually strengthened your assurance over time?

Question 3

Student Question: *The verse speaks of 'things hoped for.' In Scripture, biblical hope is not uncertainty but confident expectation of what God has promised. What are some of the unseen things God has promised His people that faith is meant to lay hold of?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Clarify the biblical meaning of hope first, since modern usage has weakened it. When we say 'I hope it does not rain,' we mean we are unsure. Biblical hope is confident expectation of a certain future secured by God's promise. Faith and hope are close companions here: faith gives substance now to the things hope reaches toward.

Lead the class to fill in the content of Christian hope from Scripture. The forgiveness of sins, adoption as God's children, the indwelling and help of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the body, an eternal inheritance, and the return of Christ are all unseen realities God has promised. Faith treats these as solid, even though none of them can be seen yet.

Show how this orientation shapes daily life. People become like what they hope in. A believer whose hope is fixed on God's promises lives differently from one whose horizon ends at this world. This is exactly the pattern we will see in the chapter, where people made costly choices because they were looking ahead to what God had promised (Hebrews 11:10, 16, 26).

Guard against drift here. Christian hope is not a vague optimism that everything will be fine, but a specific expectation anchored in specific promises of God. Keep pointing the class back to what God has actually said.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Biblical hope as confident expectation, not uncertainty
- The content of Christian hope: forgiveness, adoption, the Spirit's help, resurrection, eternal inheritance, Christ's return
- The way our hope shapes our daily choices and priorities
- Faith and hope as companions, faith giving present substance to future promises
- Hope anchored in specific promises of God rather than general optimism

Discussion Prompts

- Which promise of God most stirs your hope, and why?
- How does a person's deepest hope show up in the way they spend their time and money?
- What is the difference between Christian hope and simple optimism?

Question 4

Student Question: *Name one promise of God that you find genuinely hard to live as if it were true. What would change this week if you treated that promise as solidly real?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites vulnerability, so model it gently. Most believers have some promise they affirm with their lips but struggle to lean their weight on, whether it is God's provision, His forgiveness, His presence in suffering, or His promise to work all things for good. Naming the gap is not a failure of faith; it is the beginning of growth.

Help students see that faith is strengthened by acting on it, not by waiting to feel certain first. The people of Hebrews 11 acted before they saw. When we take a concrete step of trust, we often discover the ground was solid all along. Faith is a muscle that grows with use.

Bring it to specifics. The phrase 'this week' matters. Push past general resolutions toward one concrete action: a conversation forgiven, a tithe given, a fear surrendered in prayer, an obedience no longer delayed. Transformation happens in particulars, not in vague intentions.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between affirming a promise and living on it
- Faith strengthened by acting on God's word, not by waiting for perfect certainty
- Trust expressed in concrete, specific obedience
- Honesty about doubt as a doorway to growth rather than a sign of failure
- The transforming power of small, deliberate steps of trust

Discussion Prompts

- Which of God's promises is hardest for you to actually lean on?
- What one concrete step would treat that promise as real this week?
- How has acting on a promise before you felt sure ever strengthened your faith?

Question 5

Student Question: *Faith is called 'the conviction of things not seen.' Why is it significant that the most important realities in the Christian life are things we cannot see? How does this shape the way a believer is meant to live (compare 2 Corinthians 5:7)?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw out the striking claim of the verse: the deepest realities are invisible. God Himself, the risen Christ at the Father's right hand, the work of the Spirit, the coming kingdom in its fullness, our eternal home. None of these can be photographed. Yet they are more real and more permanent than the visible things that press on us every day.

Set this beside 2 Corinthians 5:7, 'we walk by faith, not by sight.' This is the settled posture of the Christian life. It does not mean we ignore reality; it means we refuse to let the visible have the final word over the invisible promises of God. The believer learns to factor in what cannot be seen when making decisions.

Apply it to ordinary discipleship. Living by faith means choosing obedience that only makes sense if God and eternity are real. It means generosity that only makes sense if there is treasure in heaven, purity that only makes sense if we will give an account, and endurance that only makes sense if a reward awaits. The unseen, when believed, reorders the seen.

This is the heaviest conceptual idea so far, so give it room. The whole chapter is a gallery of people who treated the unseen as the most certain thing about their lives, and it changed everything they did.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unseen realities of the faith: God, the risen Christ, the Spirit, the coming kingdom, eternal life
- Walking by faith and not by sight as the Christian's settled posture (2 Corinthians 5:7)
- The eternal and unseen as more permanent and weighty than the visible and temporary (2 Corinthians 4:18)
- Decisions that only make sense if God and eternity are real
- Faith refusing to give the visible the final word

Discussion Prompts

- What unseen reality do you most need to keep before your eyes right now?
- How would your week look different if the invisible promises of God felt as solid as your visible problems?
- Where is it hardest for you to walk by faith rather than sight?

Question 6

Student Question: *We are surrounded by a culture that says 'seeing is believing.' Where do you feel the pull to live by sight rather than by faith, and what does that pull look like in your daily decisions?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Name the cultural air we breathe. We are trained to trust only what can be measured, proven, and possessed now. That instinct quietly shapes how believers handle money, time, anxiety, and risk. Help the class see that living by sight is not usually a dramatic rejection of God; it is a thousand small decisions made as if only the visible matters.

Invite concrete honesty. The pull to live by sight shows up as worry that crowds out trust, as decisions driven by what is safe rather than what is faithful, as treasure stored where moth and rust destroy. Encourage students to locate the specific places where their practical confidence rests on the visible.

Offer a hopeful path forward. The remedy is not to despise the visible world but to keep feeding faith on God's word until the unseen feels solid. Encourage practices that strengthen the eyes of faith: Scripture, prayer, the Lord's Supper, the fellowship of the church, and remembering God's past faithfulness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cultural pressure to trust only the visible and measurable
- Living by sight expressed in worry, self-protection, and misplaced treasure
- Practical idolatry of the seen over the unseen
- Spiritual practices that strengthen the eyes of faith
- Faith as a daily, repeated choice rather than a one-time decision

Discussion Prompts

- In which area of life do you most default to 'seeing is believing'?
- What practice helps you keep the unseen realities of God in clear view?
- How does worry reveal where we are living by sight?

Question 7

Student Question: *Verse 2 says that 'by it the people of old received their commendation.' What does it mean that God commended these men and women specifically for their faith, and what does that reveal about what pleases God (compare Hebrews 11:6)?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the surprising emphasis. God did not commend these people first for their talents, their success, or even their morality in the abstract, but for their faith. Their trust in God is what won His approval, and it is the thread that ties the whole chapter together. This sets the value scale for the entire study.

Bring in Hebrews 11:6 directly, since it makes the point explicit: '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.' Faith pleases God because it honors Him as trustworthy. To trust God is to treat Him as who He really is.

Guard against a misreading here, because this is doctrinally important. The faith God commends is never a bare mental belief; it is the living trust that obeys, which the rest of the chapter will display in action. 'By faith Abel offered.' 'By faith Noah prepared.' Faith that pleases God is faith that acts. This keeps us from a 'faith only' distortion and prepares the class for James 2 at the end of the study.

Make it personal in your teaching. The same God still looks for and commends faith. The everyday trust of an ordinary believer, unseen by the world, is precious to God and will not be forgotten by Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's commendation given for faith rather than worldly achievement
- Faith pleasing God because it honors Him as trustworthy (Hebrews 11:6)
- The faith that pleases God as a living, obedient trust, not bare assent
- God as the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him
- The value God places on the ordinary, unseen faith of everyday believers

Discussion Prompts

- Why is faith the thing God singles out for commendation?
- How does Hebrews 11:6 connect believing that God exists with seeking Him?

- What does it mean to you that God notices and treasures quiet, ordinary faith?

Question 8

Student Question: *Whose example of faith has shaped you the most, whether someone in Scripture or someone you have known? What about their trust in God do you most want to imitate?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the great theme of the chapter toward gratitude and imitation. Hebrews 11 itself works by example, holding up real people so we will follow their faith. Encourage students to remember specific people whose trust in God marked them, perhaps a parent, a grandparent, an elder, or a friend.

Help them name what exactly they admire. It is rarely a person's eloquence or success; it is steadiness in hardship, quiet obedience, prayerfulness, generosity, or unshakable hope. Naming the specific quality makes it something to pursue rather than merely admire.

Point forward to Hebrews 12:1, where these examples become a great cloud of witnesses urging us on. Faith is meant to be handed down and imitated. Challenge the class to consider that they too are examples to someone watching their walk with God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical pattern of learning faith by example (Hebrews 13:7; 1 Corinthians 11:1)
- Imitation of faith as a means of discipleship
- Specific Christlike qualities worth pursuing: steadiness, obedience, prayer, generosity, hope
- Every believer as a witness whose faith influences others
- Gratitude for the faithful who have gone before us

Discussion Prompts

- Whose faith has most shaped your own, and how?
- What specific quality of their trust do you want to imitate?
- Who might be learning about faith by watching you?

Question 9

Student Question: *Verse 3 says, '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.' Why does the writer ground faith in the word of God, and how does this connect to the truth that 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Romans 10:17)? How does this guard us against the idea that faith is merely a feeling or that any sincere belief will do?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, so give it the most room. Notice that the first concrete example of faith in the chapter is believing that God created all things by His word. Faith and the spoken word of God are bound together from the very start. We were not present at creation; we know it happened because God has told us. Faith receives and rests on what God has said.

Draw the line to Romans 10:17, 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.' This is a cornerstone truth: saving faith is not generated by our own sincerity or feelings, and it is not the product of private revelation. It is created by hearing the revealed word of God. This is why preaching and teaching the Scriptures are so central, and why the complete New Testament is now our authority (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We do not wait for new revelations; we trust the word already given.

Press the guardrail the question asks about. If faith comes by the word, then faith is not merely a warm feeling, and it is not true that any sincere belief will do. Sincerity in the wrong object does not save; faith must rest on what God has actually revealed. This protects the class from two errors at once: a vague spirituality that calls any earnest belief 'faith,' and a 'faith only' notion that detaches believing from the word that defines and directs it.

Carry it home to the gospel itself. The same word that calls the universe into being calls sinners to respond to Christ. Genuine faith hears that word and obeys it: believing in Jesus as Lord, repenting of sin, confessing Him, and being baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27), and then walking faithfully thereafter. Faith that rests on God's word will do what God's word says.

Keep the tone one of wonder. The God whose word framed the galaxies has spoken to us. To build a life on that word is the most reasonable thing a creature can do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith grounded in and created by the revealed word of God (Romans 10:17)
- Creation by the word of God as the first object of faith in the chapter
- The complete New Testament Scriptures as our authority, with no need for new revelation (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Saving faith distinguished from mere feeling and from 'any sincere belief will do'
- Faith as trust that obeys the gospel: believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27)
- Sincerity insufficient apart from the right object revealed in God's word
- The reasonableness of resting one's whole life on the word of the Creator

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Scripture tie faith so closely to hearing the word of God?
- How does grounding faith in God's word protect us from making faith a mere feeling?

- If faith comes by hearing God's word, what does that say about how we should treat the Scriptures and respond to the gospel?

Question 10

Student Question: *Looking back over Hebrews 11:1–3 as a whole, name one specific area of your life where God is calling you to rest your full weight on His word this week. What is one concrete step of trust He is forming in you?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the lesson and turns it toward transformation. Faith is assurance, conviction, commended by God, and grounded in His word. Now ask each student to bring it down to one specific place in their own life where they will lean their weight on what God has said.

Encourage concreteness over generality. Resting on God's word might look like obeying the gospel if a person has never done so, forgiving someone because God commands it, giving generously because God promises to provide, or facing a fear in prayer rather than alone. The point is a real step, not merely a warmer feeling.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ, the theme the whole study is moving toward. Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2). Remind the class that the goal is not simply stronger willpower but a life increasingly shaped into His likeness as they learn to trust the Father as He did. Pray over the specific steps named.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal application of the definition of faith to one concrete area of life
- Resting on God's word expressed in specific obedience
- Christ as the author and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2)
- Spiritual formation into the likeness of Christ as the aim of the study
- The role of prayer in taking a step of trust

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to rest your weight on His word this week?
- What is one concrete step of trust, not just a feeling, that you can take?
- How can this class pray for and encourage you in that step?