

THE HALL OF FAITH

Hebrews—Chapter 11

Study 12

Faith Defined

The subject matter of the next chapter flows out from Paul's final declaration in chapter 10 that "the just shall live by faith" (verse 38). The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 identifies the nature and experience of that faith, beginning with this defining statement of what faith is:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

Immediately following this clear faith definition, the apostle Paul directs us to faith in action. "For by it," Paul affirms, "the elders obtained a good report" (Hebrews 11:2). Here we are reminded of Christ's words to the saved, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." This is a good report obtained by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the very essence of the gospel of the New Testament, and yet it is the summation of the experience of God's people in the Old Testament. This chapter is proof of both the connection between the two as well as the truth that salvation has been, and always will be, by faith in Jesus Christ and not of the works of the law (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16).

"By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (Hebrews 1:3).

According to prophetic prediction, faith in God as the Creator of the world will be challenged by Bible "scoffers" in the end of time (2 Peter 3:3-5). Jesus hints at the success of these Bible scoffers by asking if He will find faith on the earth when He returns (Luke 18:8). Those who exercise faith in a Creator God today will do so by overcoming the predominate teachings of the world (1 John 5:4).

Salvation Faith

As we move into this chapter, we will find another simple truth ringing loud and clear—all of God's Old Testament faithful were saved by grace through faith and not by works. Consider our first example:

"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4).

The history of Cain and Abel is a powerful illustration of faith verses works. God directed both Cain and Abel to sacrifice a lamb for sin, illustrating the ultimate one-time sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Abel offered this sacrifice as a testimony of faith in the Messiah to come. Cain offered the fruits of his own hands and was placed on record as the first salvation-by-my-works believer. This works based religion eventually led Cain to kill Abel, but it did not silence the witness of true faith. This powerful testimony of Abel's faith in the blood of the lamb "yet speaks" through time. It brings a faith message of exhortation for us today—don't trust in the works of your hands for salvation—trust in the Lamb of God.

Following this contrast between Cain and Abel, Hebrews 11 moves to another powerful faith testimony of a man who "pleased God."

"By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:5-6).

Again we find two opposing religious views. One view says that you can

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"God having provided something better for us." —Hebrews 11:40

All Scripture references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

please God and the other that it's impossible. Both views are laid out side by side. The deciding factor between the two is faith. Those who have faith move beyond their own doubts and fears and believe what others assume is not possible. One looks to God by faith and says 'Yes.' The other looks at self with all its weaknesses and says 'No.'

The Saga of Faith

And so Paul plunges us into this God-inspired journey down the passages of time, noting men, women and children who bravely fought the ever intense struggle to overcome the world by faith (1 John 5:4).

“By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7).

Noah exercised faith in God when the entire world stood against him. For 120 years Noah preached righteousness by faith even though none but his wife and children eventually entered the ark. Have you felt like the entire world is against you because of your faith in God? Let the life of Noah be an encouragement to you.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).

My family enjoys camping, which means we, too, get to live in tents like Abraham, but only for a few days. Unlike us, Abraham and Sarah left everything behind and tents became their permanent dwelling. Perhaps you have been uprooted and have no permanent dwelling place. As a believer, you may question if God is with you. Let the story of Abraham's faith encourage your heart.

“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore” (Hebrews 11:11-12).

Women today take a chance when they have children past the age of forty. Sarah was more than twice that age when she had Issac. Sarah's experience was an exercise of faith in the promises of God. Perhaps you feel that it is too late to receive God's blessings—that you are too old, your opportunities long passed. Sarah felt this way too, at first, but her testimony speaks hope that it is never too late to experience our truest desires if we trust in the promise of God.

The Conflict of Faith

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

The word “persuaded” in verse 13 means “convinced.” This touches on the essence of our faith conflict. It is the battle that wages between what our senses can see, feel, touch and taste verses the spiritual reality of God's Word to us. Faith embraces the unseen hope even though it may be afar off—it reaches out for something better than this world has to offer no matter how trying the ordeal. And for Abraham, this faith conflict brought the greatest trial a parent could face.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense” (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Is God calling you to make a great sacrifice for Him? You may be feeling that the sacrifice is too great; but it will never be as great as what was typified by Issac and Abraham, for in them God revealed the sacrifice of His only begotten Son for the sin of the world. Our sacrifice, no matter how large it appears, is tiny in comparison.

The Blessing of the Aged

As the years roll on, I have begun to have more appreciation for these next few verses because they take in the experience of those of us who are older. Old age has a way of making us feel unneeded. That's why I like how God included this verse about Issac blessing his children. Here we are reminded that God has a special work for those who are wise with age—to bless the younger generation.

“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff” (Hebrews 11:20-21).

And notice that Isaac blessed both Jacob and the birth-right-selling Esau. Do you feel you can't bless the undeserving? Look to Isaac. Perhaps you are old or handicapped, but like Jacob who blessed his grandchildren while blind and leaning on his staff, you too can be a blessing.

The blessing of old age is also challenged by the very nature of faith itself—the substance of things hoped for. What greater faith can be exercised than that of going to the grave while never fully realizing the reality of our hope? Here again we find a powerful testimony of faith from Joseph:

“By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones” (Hebrews 11:22).

Do you struggle because Jesus hasn't returned yet? Perhaps you thought you would see His return before death. Does the idea of departing from this earth before realizing this blessed hope seem difficult to believe? If so, look to Joseph who by faith believed that someday His people would leave Egypt, and even in death, made plans for that departure.

The Faith of Parents and Children

One of the biggest challenges to our faith is the reality of raising human beings with freedom of choice and decision. As our children grow, our desire is to shield them from harm. The parents of Moses were filled with these same longings while they lived in a time and place that made it almost impossible. The world of Egypt clamored for the life of Moses, yet these parents were faithful to protect their son:

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command” (Hebrews 11:23).

The faith of Moses' parents was not without effect. Though Moses was raised in Pharaoh's court, the influence of his parent's faith took hold upon him. And when he finally reached the age of accountability, we read this wonderful testimony to their faith.

“By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

Another truth found in these Scriptures is the fact that sin is pleasurable, which is why it is so appealing to our human nature. Yet the problem with sin's pleasure is that it's only “for a season.” The pleasure sin brings ends while the pleasure God brings does not.

“You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

Moses recognized this truth and made a choice between the seasonal pleasure of this world and the reward of never-ending pleasure in God's presence. As a prince in Egypt, money and power were his. So where would Moses be today if he had chosen the pleasure of sin for a season? Likely in some mummified gold tomb

traveling from museum to museum so people could pay big money to see him lying dead among all his gold relics. But Moses chose to believe by faith, and now he is in heaven (Jude 9) walking on golden roads (Revelation 21:21) and enjoying eternal pleasures in the painless presence of a loving God. As you wrestle by faith with the pleasures of this world, look to the life of Moses and let your choice be eternity with God.

“By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned” (Hebrews 11:27-29).

Now our faith journey moves us to earthly elements that threaten our very lives. Are you feeling overwhelmed by earthly powers? Do you need protection from some natural disaster? Are you facing an impossible ocean blocking your path? Let the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt strengthen your faith.

Faith Adventures for Today

“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days” (Hebrews 11:30).

Jericho represents a stronghold of sin, or unbelief, that needs to come down in your life today. Jericho was a powerful fortress like the sin in our lives that seem impregnable. As you face these almost overwhelming strongholds, the experience of Joshua and the walls of Jericho can give you faith.

“By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace” (Hebrews 11:31).

Do you feel unworthy of God’s protection and blessing because of your life of sin? Look to the faith of Rahab and find the hope that God has placed here for you.

“And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, [who needed repeated signs from God] and Barak [who needed the support of Deborah the prophetess] and Samson [who squandered his God given talents] and Jephthah [rejected because of his birth], also of David [overwhelmed by all his mistakes and their consequences (Ziklag, Bethsheba)] and Samuel, [rejected and unappreciated] and the prophets” (Hebrews 11:32).

All these men and women of past generations conquered their fears and failures by faith, not in themselves but in the promises of God. And in spite of their human faults and grave mistakes, they have victory recorded against their names and are described in these verses that follow:

“Who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented” (Hebrews 11:33-37).

Are you being persecuted, suffering violence, in prison or destitution? Take heart dear friend. God has a great reward for you by and by. For all those who place their faith in Christ, there awaits a good report and the promise of the eternal inheritance. The meek shall inherit the earth and hear from the words of our Captain and Savior “Well done, well done, and welcome to the city of God!”

A Good Report

“Of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrews 11:38-40).

Describing the overall experience of all those who put their trust in God, Hebrews 11 states emphatically that they all received a “good report.” As the record of their lives is summarized, nothing negative appears. The failures and mistakes of God’s people are missing from this report because they placed their faith in Jesus. There is no mention here of Noah getting drunk, or Sara laughing at God’s promises. There is nothing about Abraham’s lie concerning his wife, or Moses killing an Egyptian. Even Samson, whom we might think was lost were he not named among the faithful, has a clean record. Through the blood of Christ, God can make a clean sweep of all sin among His people. Hebrews 11 stands as a faithful record of the lives of every sinner who places their trust in God. It is God’s perspective of our lives when we overcome by faith in Christ.

Summary

The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 is not only a definition of faith but a testimony of faith in action. It is also a powerful statement of encouragement from men and women who have faced the trials and hardships of overcoming sin. If people like Rahab and Samson ended up as faith warriors, so can we. There is hope here for every one of us. Most of all, this chapter is a wonderful demonstration of what Christ’s righteousness means to every believer. The history of our lives, free from every failure, is the promise of the gospel and the reality presented in the history of God’s people as it is recorded in Hebrews 11. This is the basis of trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ. Dear friend, let this be your hope by saying ‘Yes.’ Will you accept Christ Jesus as your personal Savior from sin? Amen.

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