

HEBREWS 11

FAITH: THE GREATEST POWER IN THE WORLD

This chapter introduces the final section of the epistle (Heb. 11—13), which I have called “A Superior Principle—Faith.” The fact that Christ is a superior Person (Heb. 1—6) and that He exercises a superior Priesthood (Heb. 7—10) ought to encourage us to put our trust in Him. The readers of this epistle were being tempted to go back into Judaism and put their faith in Moses. Their confidence was in the visible things of this world, not the invisible realities of God. Instead of going on to perfection (maturity), they were going “back to perdition [waste]” (Heb. 6:1; 10:39).

In Hebrews 11 all Christians are called to live by faith. In it, the writer discussed two important topics relating to faith.

The Description of Faith (11:1–3)

This is not a definition of faith but a description of what faith does and how it works. True Bible faith is not blind optimism or a manufactured “hope-so” feeling. Neither is it an intellectual assent to a doctrine. It is certainly not believing in spite of evidence! That would be superstition.

True Bible faith is confident obedience to God’s Word in spite of circumstances and consequences. Read that last sentence again and let it soak into your mind and heart.

This faith operates quite simply. God speaks and we hear His Word. We trust His Word and act on it no matter what the circumstances are or what the consequences may be. The circumstances may be impossible, and the consequences frightening and unknown; but we obey God’s Word just the same and believe Him to do what is right and what is best.

The unsaved world does not understand true Bible faith, probably because it sees so little faith in action in the church today. The cynical editor H. L. Mencken defined faith as “illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible.” The world fails to realize that faith is only as good as its object, and the object of our faith is *God*. Faith is not some “feeling” that we manufacture. It is our total response to what God has revealed in His Word.

Three words in Hebrews 11:1–3 summarize what true Bible faith is: *substance*, *evidence*, and *witness*. The word translated “substance” means literally “to stand under, to support.” Faith is to a Christian what a foundation is to a house: it gives confidence and assurance that he will stand. So you might say, “Faith is the confidence of things hoped for.” When a believer has faith, it is God’s way of giving him confidence and assurance that what is promised will be experienced.

The word *evidence* simply means “conviction.” This is the inward conviction from God that what He has promised, He will perform. The presence of God-given faith in one’s heart is conviction enough that He will keep His Word.

Witness (KJV, “obtained a good report”) is an important word in Hebrews 11. It occurs not only in verse 2, but twice in verse 4, once in verse 5, and once in verse 39. The summary in Hebrews 12:1 calls this list of men and women “so great a cloud of witnesses.” They are witnesses to us because God witnessed to them. In each example cited, God gave witness to that person’s faith. This witness was His divine approval on their lives and ministries.

The writer of Hebrews made it clear that faith is a very practical thing (Heb. 11:3), in spite of what unbelievers say. Faith enables us to understand what God does. Faith enables us to see what others cannot see (note Heb. 11:7, 13, 27). As a result, faith enables us to do what others cannot do! People laughed at these great men and women when they stepped out by faith, but God was with them and enabled them to succeed to His glory. Dr. J. Oswald Sanders put it perfectly: “Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.”

The best way to grow in faith is to walk with the faithful. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a summary of the lives and labors of great men and women of faith found in the Old Testament. In each instance, you will find the same elements of faith: (1) God spoke to them through His Word; (2) their inner selves were stirred in different ways; (3) they obeyed God; (4) He bore witness about them.

The Demonstration of Faith (11:4–40)

Abel—faith worshipping (v. 4). The background story is in Genesis 4:1–10. Abel was a righteous man because of faith (Matt. 23:35). God had revealed to Adam and his descendants the true way of worship, and Abel obeyed God by faith. In fact, his obedience cost him his life. Cain was not a child of God (1 John 3:12) because he did not have faith. He was religious but not righteous. Abel speaks to us today as the first martyr of the faith.

Enoch—faith walking (vv. 5–6). Our faith in God grows as we fellowship with God. We must have both the *desire* to please Him and the *diligence* to seek Him. Prayer, meditating on the Word, worship, discipline—all of these help us in our walk with God. Enoch walked with God in the wicked world, before the flood came; he was able to keep his life pure. Enoch was taken to heaven one day (“translated” = “carried across”) and seen no more. Abel died a violent death, but Enoch never died. God has a different plan for each one who trusts Him. Some see in the translation of Enoch a picture of the rapture of the church when Jesus Christ returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Noah—faith working (v. 7). Noah’s faith involved the whole person: his *mind* was warned of God; his *heart* was moved with fear; and his *will* acted on what God told him. Since nobody at that time had ever seen a flood (or perhaps even a rainstorm), Noah’s actions must have generated a great deal of interest and probably ridicule as well. Noah’s faith influenced his whole family and they were saved. It also condemned the whole world, for his faith revealed their unbelief.

Events proved that Noah was right! Jesus used this experience to warn people to be ready for His return (Matt. 24:36–42). In Noah’s day, the people were involved in innocent everyday activities and completely ignored Noah’s witness (2 Peter 2:5).

The patriarchs—faith waiting (vv. 8–22). The emphasis in this section is on the promise of God and His plans for the nation of Israel (Heb. 11:9, 11, 13, 17). The nation began with the call of Abraham. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but they had to wait twenty-five years for the fulfillment of the promise. Their son Isaac became the father of Jacob and Esau, and it was Jacob who really built the nation through the birth of his twelve sons. Joseph saved the nation *in* the land of Egypt, and Moses would later deliver them *from* Egypt.

Waiting is, for me, one of the most difficult disciplines of life. Yet true faith is able to wait for the fulfillment of God’s purposes *in God’s time*. But, while we are waiting, we must also be obeying. “By faith Abraham ... obeyed” (Heb. 11:8). He obeyed when *he did not know where he was going* (Heb. 11:8–10). He lived in tents because he was a stranger and pilgrim in the world and had to be ready to move whenever God spoke. Christians today are also strangers and pilgrims (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). Abraham had his eyes on the heavenly city and lived “in the future tense.”

He also obeyed when *he did not know how God’s will would be accomplished* (Heb. 11:11–12). Both Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children. Yet they both believed that God would do the miracle (Rom. 4:13–25). Unbelief asks, “How *can* this be?” (Luke 1:18–20). Faith asks, “How *shall* this be?” (Luke 1:34–37).

Abraham believed and obeyed God when *he did not know when God would fulfill His promises* (Heb. 11:13–16). None of the patriarchs saw the complete fulfillment of God’s promises, but they saw from “afar off” what God was doing. Dr. George Morrison, a great Scottish preacher, once said, “The important thing is not what we live in, but what we look for.” These men and women of faith lived in tents, but they knew a heavenly city awaited them. God always fulfills His promises to His believing people, either immediately or ultimately. Finally, Abraham obeyed God by faith when *he did not know why God was so working* (Heb. 11:17–19). Why would God want Abraham to sacrifice his son when it was the Lord who gave him that son? All of a future nation’s promises were wrapped up in Isaac. The tests of faith become more difficult as we walk with God, yet the rewards are more wonderful! And we must not ignore the obedient faith of Isaac. In Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, we have four generations of faith. These men sometimes failed, but basically they were men of faith. They were not perfect, but they were devoted to God and trusted His Word. Isaac passed the promises and the blessings along to Jacob (Gen. 27), and Jacob shared them with his twelve sons (Gen. 48–49). Jacob was a pilgrim, for even as he was dying he leaned on his pilgrim staff.

The faith of Joseph was certainly remarkable. After the way his family treated him, you would think he would have abandoned his faith, but instead, it grew stronger. Even the ungodly influence of Egypt did not weaken his trust in God. Joseph did not

use his family, his job, or his circumstances as an excuse for unbelief. *Joseph knew what he believed*—that God would one day deliver his people from Egypt (Gen. 50:24–26). *Joseph also knew where he belonged*—in Canaan, not in Egypt, so he made them promise to carry his remains out of Egypt at the exodus. They did (see Ex. 13:19 and Josh. 24:32)!

We have to admire the faith of the patriarchs. They did not have a complete Bible, and yet their faith was strong. They handed God's promises down from one generation to another. In spite of their failures and testings, these men and women believed God and He bore witness to their faith. How much more faith you and I should have!

Moses—faith warring (vv. 23–29). Moses was fortunate to have believing parents. For them to hide their baby son from the authorities was certainly an act of faith. The account is given in Exodus 2:1–10. Moses' parents were named Amram and Jochebed (Ex. 6:20). Though godly parents cannot pass on their faith as they do family traits, they can certainly create an atmosphere of faith at home and be examples to their children. A home should be the first school of faith for a child.

Three great themes relating to faith are seen in the life of Moses. First, *the refusal of faith* (Heb. 11:24–25). As the adopted son of the Egyptian princess, Moses could have led an easy life in the palace. But his faith moved him to refuse that kind of life. He chose to identify with God's suffering people. True faith causes a believer to hold the right values and make the right decisions. The phrase "pleasures of sin" does not refer only to lust and other gross sins. The phrase describes a way of life that we today would call "successful"—position, prestige, power, wealth, and freedom from problems.

Moses' refusal of faith led to *the reproach of faith* (Heb. 11:26a). The mayor of a large American city moved into a dangerous and decayed housing project to demonstrate the problems and needs of the minorities. But she also kept her fashionable apartment and eventually moved out of the slum. We commend her for her courage, but we have to admire Moses even more. He left the palace *and never went back to the old life!* He identified with the Jewish slaves! Men and women of faith often have to bear reproach and suffering. The apostles suffered for their faith. Contemporary believers behind the Iron Curtain knew what it was to bear reproach. If reproach is an evidence of true faith, we wonder how much true faith there is in our own country today!

Finally, there is *the reward of faith* (Heb. 11:26b–29). God always rewards true faith—if not immediately, at least ultimately. Over against "the treasures in Egypt" Moses saw the "recompense of the reward." As Dr. Vance Havner said, "Moses chose the imperishable, saw the invisible, and did the impossible." Moses' faith enabled him to face Pharaoh unafraid, and to trust God to deal with the enemy. The endurance of Moses was not a natural gift, for by nature Moses was hesitant and retiring. This endurance and courage came as the reward of his faith.

The faith of Moses was rewarded with deliverance for him and his people. (See Ex. 11–13 for the exciting Passover account.) Faith brings us *out* (Heb. 11:28), takes us *through* (Heb. 11:29), and brings us *in* (Heb. 11:30). When we trust God, we get what

God can do, but when we trust ourselves, we get only what weak people can do. The experience of Moses is proof that true biblical faith means obeying God in spite of circumstances and in spite of consequences. If you and I had been writing this chapter, the next section would be *Faith Wandering*—but there is no mention of Israel’s failure and forty years of wasted time. Why? Because that was an experience of *unbelief*, not faith! The writer did use this experience in Hebrews 3 and 4 as an illustration of doubting the Word. But nowhere in Hebrews 11 will you find a record of *any* failure because of unbelief. Faith records only the victories.

Joshua and Rahab—faith winning (vv. 30–31). The account of the conquest of Jericho is found in Joshua 2–6. Joshua was Moses’ successor as leader of Israel, and he succeeded because he trusted the same God that Moses had trusted. God changes His workmen, but He does not change His principles of operation. He blesses faith and He judges unbelief. From a human point of view, Jericho was an impossible city to conquer. However, Joshua’s first act of faith was not the defeat of the city, but the crossing of the Jordan River. By faith, the nation crossed the river just as the previous generation had crossed the Red Sea. This was a witness and a warning to the Canaanite nations that Israel was marching forward by the power of God.

Rahab was a harlot, an unlikely person to put faith in the true God of Israel! *She was saved by grace*, because the other inhabitants of the city were marked out for death. God in His mercy and grace permitted Rahab to live. But *she was saved by faith*. What she knew about God is recorded in Joshua 2:8–14. She knew that Jehovah had delivered Israel from Egypt and that He had opened the Red Sea. But that was forty years before! She also knew God had defeated the other nations during Israel’s wilderness wanderings. “For the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath” (Josh. 2:11). That was her testimony of faith, and God honored it.

She was saved unto good works. True faith must always show itself in good works (James 2:20–26). She protected the spies, put the cord in the window as directed (Josh. 2:15–21), apparently won her family to the true faith (Josh. 2:13; 6:25), and in every way obeyed the Lord. Not only was Rahab delivered from judgment, but she became a part of the nation of Israel. She married Salmon and gave birth to Boaz who was an ancestor of King David (Matt. 1:4–6). Imagine a pagan harlot becoming a part of the ancestry of Jesus Christ! That is what faith can do!

Rahab is certainly a rebuke to unsaved people who give excuses for not trusting Christ. “I don’t know very much about the Bible” is an excuse I often hear. Rahab knew very little spiritual truth, but she acted on what she did know. “I am too bad to be saved!” is another excuse. But Rahab was a condemned heathen harlot! Another excuse is “What will my family think?” Rahab’s first concern was *saving* her family, not opposing them. She stands as one of the great women of faith in the Bible.

Various heroes of faith (vv. 32–40). Faith can operate in the life of any person who will dare to listen to God’s Word and surrender to God’s will. What a variety of

personalities we have here! Gideon was a frightened farmer whose faith did not grow strong right away (Judg. 6:11—7:25). Barak won a resounding victory over Sisera, but he needed Deborah the prophetess as his helper to assure him (see Judg. 4:1—5:31). Both Gideon and Barak are encouragements to us who falter in our faith.

The story of Samson is familiar (Judg. 13—16). We would not call Samson a godly man, for he yielded to his fleshly appetites. He was a Nazarite, which meant he was dedicated to God and was never to cut his hair or partake of the fruit of the vine. (A Nazarite should not be confused with a Nazarene, a resident of Nazareth.) Samson did trust God to help and deliver him and, in the end, Samson was willing to give his life to defeat the enemy. However, we must not conclude that believers today can expect to lead double lives and still enjoy God's blessing.

Jephthah's story is fascinating (Judg. 11:1—12:7). It is unlikely that he sacrificed his only daughter as a burnt offering, for this was forbidden in Israel. Probably he dedicated her to the Lord on the basis of the "law of vows" (Lev. 27), dedicating her to perpetual virginity (Judg. 11:34–40).

It is not possible for us to examine each example of faith, and even the writer of Hebrews stopped citing names after he mentioned David and Samuel, who were certainly great men of faith. There are examples in the Old Testament of men and women who won the victories referred to in Hebrews 11:33–35. David certainly subdued kingdoms and wrought righteousness. Daniel's faith "stopped the mouths of lions" (Dan. 6), and the three Hebrew children overcame the power of the fiery furnace (Dan. 3:23–28). The women of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11:35 have their stories given in 1 Kings 17:17–24 and 2 Kings 4:18–37.

The transition in Hebrews 11:35 is important: not all men and women of faith experienced miraculous deliverance. Some were tortured and died! The word translated "others" in Hebrews 11:36 means "others of a different land." These "others" had faith, but God did not see fit to deal with them in the same way he dealt with Moses, Gideon, and David.

While making a hospital visit, I found a patient lying in bed weeping. "What's the matter?" I asked. Her reply was to hand me a book that she had that day received in the mail. It was on "divine healing" and "the power of faith." Some anonymous person had written on the flyleaf, "Read this book—it will give you faith to be healed." The patient happened to be a dedicated Christian who trusted God even in the midst of suffering. But her anonymous correspondent thought that *all* people with faith should be delivered miraculously.

I have personally experienced God's miracle touch on my body when others were sure I would die. I know that God can heal. But I also know that God *does not have to heal* in order to prove that I have faith. The writer of Hebrews (11:36–38) recorded the fact that many unknown men and women of faith *were not delivered* from difficult circumstances, yet God honored their faith. In fact, it takes more faith to *endure* than it

does to *escape*. Like the three Hebrew children, we should trust God and obey Him *even if He does not deliver us* (Dan. 3:16–18).

Man's estimate of these heroes of faith was a low one, so men persecuted them, arrested them, tortured them, and in some cases, killed them. But God's estimate is entirely different. He said that the world was not worthy of these people! The apostle Paul is a good illustration of this truth. Festus said that Paul was out of his mind (Acts 26:24). The Jews said Paul was not fit to live (Acts 22:22). Paul himself said he was treated like "the filth of the world ... the offscouring of all things" (1 Cor. 4:13). Yet Paul was God's chosen vessel, probably the greatest Christian who ever lived!

Faith enables us to turn from the approval of the world and seek only the approval of God. If God is glorified by delivering His people, He will do it. If He sees fit to be glorified by *not* delivering His people, then He will do that. But we must never conclude that the absence of deliverance means a lack of faith on the part of God's children.

Faith looks to the future, for that is where the greatest rewards are found. The people named in this chapter (and those unnamed) did not receive "the promises" (what was promised, Heb. 11:13) but they had God's witness to their faith that one day they would be rewarded. God's purpose involves Old Testament saints as well as New Testament saints! One day all of us shall share that heavenly city that true saints look for by faith.

We today should give thanks for these saints of old, for they were faithful during difficult times, and yet *we* are the ones who have received the "better blessing." They saw some of these blessings afar off (see John 8:56), but we enjoy them today through Jesus Christ. If the saints of old had not trusted God and obeyed His will, Israel would have perished and the Messiah would not have been born.

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). But this kind of faith grows as we listen to His Word (Rom. 10:17) and fellowship in worship and prayer. Faith is possible to all kinds of believers in all kinds of situations. It is not a luxury for a few "elite saints." It is a necessity for all of God's people. Lord, increase our faith!ⁱ

ⁱ This Commentary was written by Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Confident (Hebrews): Live by Faith, Not by Sight* (The BE Series Commentary)