

Bible Study April 12, 2023

HEBREWS 11 (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

By Faith

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Faith starts with believing in God's goodness and truth—that he is who he says he is. Faith culminates with knowing that God will do what he promises. When we believe that he will fulfill his promises even though we don't see them materializing yet, we demonstrate true faith (see John 20:24-31).

² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ 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.

God called the universe into existence out of nothing; he declared that it was to be, and it was. Our faith rests in the God who created the entire universe by his word. God's word has awesome power. When he speaks, do you listen and respond? How can you better prepare yourself to respond to his voice?

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

Cain and Abel were Adam and Eve's first two sons. Abel offered a sacrifice that pleased God, while Cain's sacrifice was unacceptable to him. Abel's sacrifice, an animal, was more acceptable to God both because it was a blood sacrifice and, more importantly, because of Abel's attitude when he offered it.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ⁶ And 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.

Believing that God exists is only the beginning; even the demons believe that much (James 2:19-20). God will not settle for mere acknowledgment of his existence. He wants your faith to lead to a personal, dynamic relationship.

The great church leader Augustine was among the first to ponder the relationship of faith to reason. He concluded, "I believe in order to understand"—meaning that true understanding follows commitment to God. We cannot hope to understand God by human reason alone. Almost 900 years after Augustine, the great theologian Thomas Aquinas wrote that reason, while marred by sin, can know God through arguments and proofs. God has given us minds, and they should be developed and used. To ignore intellectual growth is to live a stunted and naive life. God wants our trust and faith, even while we ponder and wonder about so many matters that are mysterious to us. God has spoken to us—to our minds, hearts, and wills—in the person of Jesus Christ. We

do not believe in a void, nor leap into the dark. Faith is reasonable, though reason alone cannot explain the whole of it. Use your mind to think through your faith but leave room for the unexplainable works of God.

Sometimes we wonder about the fate of those who haven't heard of Christ and have never even had a Bible to read. God assures us that all who honestly seek him—who act in faith on the knowledge of God that they possess—will be rewarded. When you tell others the Good News, encourage them to be honest and diligent in their search for truth. Those who hear the Good News, however, are responsible for what they have heard (see 2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Noah experienced rejection because he was different from his neighbors. God commanded him to build a huge boat in the middle of dry land, and although God's command seemed foolish, Noah obeyed it. Noah's obedience made him appear strange to his neighbors, just as the new beliefs of Jewish Christians undoubtedly made them stand out from theirs. As you obey God, don't be surprised if others give you labels or regard you as different. Your obedience makes their disobedience stand out. Remember, if God asks you to do something, he will give you the necessary strength to carry out that task.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Abraham's life was filled with faith. At God's command, he left home and went to another land, obeying without question (Genesis 12:1-20). He believed the covenant that God made with him (Genesis 12:2-3; 13:14-16; 15:1-6). He didn't know where he was going, but he trusted the one leading him. In obedience to God, Abraham was even willing to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). Do not be surprised if God asks you to give up secure, familiar surroundings in order to carry out his will.

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Sarah was Abraham's wife. They were unable to have children through many years of their marriage. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but Sarah doubted that she could become pregnant in her old age. At first she laughed, but later she believed him (Genesis 18).

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

That we are “foreigners and nomads” on earth may be an awareness forced on us by circumstances. It may come late in life or as the result of difficult times. But this world is not our true home. We cannot live here forever (also see 1 Peter 1:1). It is best for us not to be so attached to this world’s desires and possessions that we can’t move out at God’s command.

14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

These people of faith died without receiving all that God had promised. But they never lost their vision of heaven (“a better place, a heavenly homeland”), even though they only saw it in the distance by faith. Many Christians become frustrated and feel defeated because their needs, wants, expectations, and demands are not immediately met when they accept Christ as Savior. Their pain or loneliness may be too great. They may become impatient and want to quit. Are you discouraged because the relief you need or the achievement of your goal seems far away? Take courage from these heroes of faith, who lived and died without seeing the fruit of their faith on earth and yet continued to believe in God and his promises (see 11:36-39).

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham was willing to give up his son when God commanded him to do so (Genesis 22:1-19). God did not let Abraham take Isaac’s life, because he had given the command in order to test Abraham’s faith. Instead of taking Abraham’s son, God gave Abraham a whole nation of descendants through him. If you are afraid to trust God with the possession, dream, or person you treasure most, pay attention to Abraham’s example. Because Abraham was willing to give up everything for God, he received back more than he could have imagined. What we receive, however, may not always come immediately or in the form of material possessions. Material things should be among the least satisfying of rewards. Our best and greatest rewards await us in eternity.

20 By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

Isaac was the son who had been promised to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Through Isaac, God fulfilled his promise to eventually give Abraham countless descendants. Isaac had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. God chose to continue the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham through the younger son, Jacob.

21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

Jacob was Isaac’s son and Abraham’s grandson. Jacob’s sons became the fathers of Israel’s 12 tribes. Even when Jacob (also called Israel) was dying in a strange land, he believed the promise that Abraham’s descendants would be like the sand on the seashore and that Israel would become a great nation (Genesis 48:1-22). True faith helps us see beyond the grave.

22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers (Genesis 37). Eventually, Joseph was sold again, this time to an official of the pharaoh of Egypt. Because of Joseph's faithfulness to God, however, he was given a top-ranking position in Egypt. Although Joseph could have used that position to build a personal empire, he remembered God's promise to Abraham. After he had been reconciled to his brothers, Joseph brought his family to be near him and requested that his bones be taken to the Promised Land when the Jews eventually left Egypt (Genesis 50:24-25). Faith involves trusting in God and doing what he wants, regardless of the circumstances or consequences.

23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

Moses' parents trusted God to protect their son's life. They were not merely proud parents; they were believers who had faith that God would care for him. As a parent, have you trusted God enough to take care of your children? God has a plan for every person, so take up the important task of praying for your children and preparing them to do the work God has planned for them. Faith allows us to entrust even our children to God.

24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

We find our real treasure in heaven. Consider the most powerful, wealthy, and well-known people in the world—how many got where they are by being humble, self-effacing, and gentle? Not many! But in Christ's eternal Kingdom, the humble people will be lifted up. Hebrews has a critical message for earth-loving Christians: Don't forfeit eternal rewards for temporary benefits. Like Moses, be willing to make sacrifices now for greater rewards later (Matthew 6:19-21).

27 By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

Moses became one of Israel's greatest leaders and a prophet and a lawgiver. But when he was born, his people were slaves in Egypt, and Pharaoh had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys were to be killed. Moses was spared, however, and Pharaoh's daughter, of all people, raised Moses in Pharaoh's own household (Exodus 1–2). Moses needed faith to give up his pleasurable and comfortable place in the palace as well as the treasures of Egypt, but he could do it because he saw the fleeting nature of great wealth and prestige. We can easily be deceived by the temporary benefits of wealth, popularity, status, or achievement and be blind to the long-range benefits of God's Kingdom. Faith helps us look beyond the world's value system to see and choose the eternal values of God's Kingdom.

29 By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after

they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

When Joshua planned the conquest of Jericho, he sent spies to investigate the fortifications of the city. The spies met Rahab, who had two strikes against her—she was a Gentile and a prostitute. But she showed that she had faith in God by welcoming the spies and by trusting God to spare her and her family when the city was destroyed. Faith helps us turn around and start living God's way, regardless of our pasts or the disapproval of others.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

The Old Testament records the lives of the various people who experienced these great victories. Joshua and Deborah overthrew kingdoms (see the book of Joshua; Judges 4–5). Nehemiah ruled with justice (see the book of Nehemiah). Daniel was saved from the mouths of lions (Daniel 6). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were kept from harm in the flames of a blazing furnace (Daniel 3). Elijah escaped death by the edge of the sword from evil Queen Jezebel's henchmen (1 Kings 19:2-21). Hezekiah regained strength after sickness (2 Kings 20). Gideon was strong in battle (Judges 7). A widow's son was brought back to life by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-37).

We, too, can experience victory through faith in Christ. Our victories over oppressors may be like those of the Old Testament saints, but more likely, they will be directly related to the unique role God wants us to play. Even though our bodies deteriorate and die, we will live forever because of Christ. In the promised resurrection, even death will be defeated, and Christ's victory will be complete.

³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,

Many think that pain is the exception in the Christian life. When suffering occurs, they ask, Why me? They may feel as though God has deserted them, or they may accuse him of not being as dependable as they thought. In reality, however, bad things happen because we live in an evil world filled with suffering, even for believers. But God is still in control of everything. He allows some Christians to become martyrs for the faith, and he allows others to survive persecution. Rather than asking, Why me? a more helpful question is Why not me? Our faith and the values of this world are on a collision course. If we expect pain and suffering to come, we will not be shocked when they hit. But we can also take comfort in knowing that Jesus also suffered. He understands our fears, our weaknesses, and our disappointments (see 2:16-18; 4:14-16). He promised never to leave us (Matthew 28:18-20), and he intercedes on our behalf (Hebrews 7:24-

25). In times of pain, persecution, or suffering, we should trust confidently in Christ. The next time you suffer, imagine Jesus beside you, holding you with love and compassion and assuring you of a perfect future forever.

⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

These verses summarize the lives of other great men and women of faith. Some experienced outstanding victories, even over the threat of death. But others were severely mistreated, tortured, and even killed. Having steadfast faith in God does not guarantee a happy, carefree life. On the contrary, our faith almost guarantees us some form of abuse from the world. While we are on earth, we may never see the purpose of our suffering. But we can know with confidence that God will keep his promises to us.

Hebrews 11 has been called faith's hall of fame. No doubt the author surprised readers by this conclusion: These mighty biblical heroes did not receive all that God had promised because they died before Christ came. In God's plan, they and Christian believers, who were also enduring much testing, would be rewarded together. Once again Hebrews shows that Christianity offers a better way than Judaism.

Believers find solidarity with other believers (see 12:23). Old and New Testament believers will be glorified together. Not only are we one in the body of Christ with all those who are still alive, but we are also one with all those who have ever lived. All believers will reach the point of perfection in Christ together, sharing in the promised blessing with Him.