

Meaning of Faith

Bible Background • HEBREWS 11; 13:1-19

Printed Text • HEBREWS 11:1-8, 13-16 | Devotional Reading • HEBREWS 11:32-40

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will IDENTIFY the faith contributions of the heroes in Hebrews 11, VALUE the people in our lives who act heroically through faith, and GROW in our potential to become faith heroes.

In Focus

The telephone rang early in the morning. Frances reached out with her one good arm, picked up the phone, and answered it by saying, "Praise the Lord!"

"How are you today, Frances?" her prayer partner asked.

"I'm blessed," Frances replied. "I can answer to my name this morning, and my health is good." Frances then began to pray, thanking God for His mercy and goodness.

Frances always quoted the Scriptures back to God when she prayed. She was always careful to mention the names of the unsaved loved ones of the saints. Her list was extensive. Her prayer partner often wondered how Frances could remember so many people at her age. But Frances was committed to pray for each one.

Frances had lost the use of one arm and had been using a wheelchair for many years, but she could still pray. She was absolutely sure that God would save all of those for whom she prayed. Her mission was to stand in the gap for the unsaved until they found their way to the Way.

Frances lived to be 103 years old. At the time of her death, many of the people she prayed for had turned to Christ, but many more had not. Frances did not live to see her prayers fully answered, but she never doubted that God would answer them all.

In what part of your life do you need to have more faith in God's power to do His will? How do we live a life with complete faith in God?

Keep in Mind

"Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see" (Hebrews 11:1, NLT)

Words You Should Know

A. Substance (v. 1) hupostasis (Gk.)— Something basic or foundational; a concrete reality on which things can be built

B. Moved with fear (v. 7) eulabetheis (Gk.)—Possessing reverent regard for things commanded by God

Say It Correctly

Enoch. EE-nock.

Xenophobia. zee-no-fo-bee-ah.

KJV

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

2 For by it the elders obtained a good report.

3 Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

4 By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

15 And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

NLT

Hebrews 11:1 Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.

2 Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.

3 By faith we understand that the entire universe was formed at God's command, that what we now see did not come from anything that can be seen.

4 It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did. Abel's offering gave evidence that he was a righteous man, and God showed his approval of his gifts. Although Abel is long dead, he still speaks to us by his example of faith.

5 It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying—"he disappeared, because God took him." For before he was taken up, he was known as a person who pleased God.

6 And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

7 It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before. By his faith Noah condemned the rest of the world, and he received the righteousness that comes by faith.

8 It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going.

13 All these people died still believing what God had promised them. They did not receive what was promised, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed it. They agreed that they were foreigners and nomads here on earth.

14 Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own.

15 If they had longed for the country they came from, they could have gone back.

16 But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The People, Places, and Times

Enoch. Even though Enoch only appears in three verses in the Genesis record, much more is written of him in Jewish tradition. Ancient rabbis wrote about him in the books of 1 and 2 Enoch, wherein he prophesies about the end times. Enoch is listed in Hebrews 11 as the second hero of faith. The account in Genesis is concise: "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). Enoch never tasted death; he went directly into the Lord's presence. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Enoch pleased God.

The Book of Hebrews. The authorship of Hebrews is unknown. Early church leaders believed that Paul wrote Hebrews, but almost all modern theologians and scholars reject this assertion. Some scholars have postulated that the author is Barnabas, which would explain certain theological similarities to Paul's letters.

The first audience of the book of Hebrews knew Jewish Scripture and professed faith in Christ. Centuries of Hebrew tradition were replaced with spiritual freedom based upon faith in Christ. As a result, the believers experienced the wrath of the Jewish religious establishment. The writer wanted to prevent believers from rejecting Christianity and returning to Judaism, and so emphasized the superiority of faith in Christ above even the Jewish faith.

Background

To encourage his audience in the faith, the writer of Hebrews explained the superiority of faith by examples of people who demonstrated greater faith. Through examples in biblical history, faith is revealed through assurance in God's future promises with the implications that inspire believers to persevere. Through the summary of Jewish history, the heroes of faith challenge believers to grow in faith and live in obedience to God.

In chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews uses a literary technique called anaphora, whereby he begins each account with the same Greek phrase translated, "By faith." Hebrews 11 is a literary masterpiece and a historical retrospective. The chapter should be studied for the eternal principles it teaches and read simply for the beauty of the writing.

At-A-Glance

1. Faith is Confidence and Certainty (Hebrews 11:1-3)
2. Faith Rewarded (vv. 4-5, 7-8)
3. Faith Is Necessary (v. 6)
4. Unfulfilled Hopes in Things Unseen (vv. 13-16)

In Depth

1. Faith is Confidence and Certainty (Hebrews 11:1-3) Faith is vital for God's people. Having faith means taking God at His word and accepting what He says as true. The reality of faith is what is "hoped for" in the hearts and minds of believers. As the "evidence of things not seen," faith is the means of enduring against all opposition and the fiercest persecution. We cannot see the future nor do we know what will happen tomorrow, but our confidence is based upon the certainty of God's trustworthiness.

To encourage struggling believers to hold to the superiority of their faith in Christ, the writer refers the believers to the elders of the Old Testament, the patriarchs and heroes of Israel (v. 2). The "elders" received a "good report," which was their evidence that they would participate in God's Kingdom when it arrives in its fullness. Their actions revealed a genuine faith that brings them honor.

By faith, we believe God spoke and created the entire universe. Our faith is based upon who God is; our response should be confident and certain hope in God because He is ever present.

Do you have certain and confident faith in God's promises? What promises of God do you hold most dear?

2. Faith Rewarded (vv. 4-5, 7-8) Abel and Enoch are the first heroes of faith. We do not hear much about them in the Genesis account. However, the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that Abel was demonstrating his faith in God with his sacrifice. Enoch's faith pleased God. At this point, the writer interjects a comment on the necessity of faith, which is discussed further below.

The third hero was Noah. Taking God at His word concerning things not yet seen, with no sign of a flood approaching, Noah built the enormous craft. If not even a single person had believed God's warning, then God might have shown mercy. However, Noah's belief shows that faith in God was not impossible even in that wicked generation. The rest of the world, therefore, were condemned by their unbelief (Hebrews 11:7).

The fourth hero was Abraham. Abraham is known as the "father of the faithful." At God's command, he left his homeland and all his relatives to journey to a new home (Genesis 12:1-4). In obedience to God, without the slightest idea of where he was going, Abraham left all that he knew. When he finally arrived at his destination, he didn't build a house. He lived in tents like a visitor in the land (Genesis 13:3-4; Hebrews 11:9).

3. Faith Is Necessary (v. 6) Most believers desire to please God, and many attempt to please Him by their works and deeds. When our works are not done in faith, God rejects them, because without faith it is impossible to please Him. Faith is necessary to have an active relationship with God; it reveals the reality of God. Faith is necessary if you wish to walk with God.

The heroes of faith believed and obeyed regardless of the consequences. In the same way, we can believe with a willing trust and please God. Our steadfast confidence is based upon who God is—the Creator of the universe. God will recognize and reward our faith because we "diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). By faith, we realize our own insufficiency and depend on God to work within us and through us. By faith we have confident trust in the continual promises of God.

Faith is the beginning of our relationship with God. What qualities of faith are necessary to continue to grow and strengthen our relationship with God?

4. Unfulfilled Hopes in Things Unseen (vv. 13-16) A lack of faith hinders many Christians in their walk with God. The stories of these individuals should encourage us to persevere in faith, regardless of the obstacles. The faithful people of the Old Testament did not receive all that God had promised them, but they never lost hope. The focus of the heroes was never the realization of earthly promises. Instead, they looked forward to becoming heirs of righteousness (v. 7).

What gave our faithful ancestors hope even though they were "strangers and pilgrims" (v. 13)?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why is faith necessary to "understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God" (Hebrews 11:3)?
2. Who are the people commended by God because of their faith? (v. 2)
3. Why is it impossible to please God without faith? (v. 6)

Discuss the Meaning

1. Does true faith mean that God will give us whatever we ask for if we truly believe in Him? Explain your answer.

2. Tragedies and crises happen to everyone. How does faith help heal lives that have been broken by tragedy?

Liberating Lesson

Today, many are homeless or unemployed. Natural disasters destroy homes and lives. War and destruction are continually reported by the news. While positive change seems nonexistent, we must not lose hope. God is ever-present. We can rely on God for positive change as we realize our faith will be tested. Many people in our society have given up all hope of a better life for themselves. How can faith in God help to restore their hope? What part do you play in helping them acquire this faith?

Application for Activation

Although Abraham, Sarah, and the other heroes of faith were the true heirs of God's justice and promises, they lived as foreigners and strangers in the earth seeking a homeland. The Greek word for "strangers" is *xenoi* (ZEE-noy) and it is a part of the composite term "xenophobia" that describes a fear of strangers or people who are different. Having hope in a hopeless world and seeing opportunities where others see only defeat can make one feel like a stranger. This takes on even more materiality as we consider immigrants and refugees who attempt to live by faith and pursue a hope for a better life, but they instead are often met by lies and prejudices that attempt to limit their lives and portray them as delinquents. What can your Bible study group or church do to help immigrants and refugees in your area?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Hebrews 11:1-8, 13-16

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. This verse is one of the most popular in Christianity, and it is extremely important for understanding the rest of the passage. It is often thought of as a definition of what faith is, but it is more like a description of what faith does. It sets the tone for the examples that follow, which demonstrate how faith operates.

The writer states that faith is the “substance” (Gk. hypostasis, hoo-PO-stah-sis) of things hoped for. This Greek word literally means “that which stands under.” It is used in philosophical literature to depict the full expression of an idea or the full support of how one thinks the way they do. It also can refer to the foundation of a building. The author depicts faith as the substructure and explanation of things hoped for. Faith is the fundamental building block that allows hope to stand and have meaning.

The writer also describes faith as the elegchos (EH-leng-khos) of things that are not seen. This Greek word means more than conviction or evidence. It means scrutinized evidence that convicts. Put another way, it means the careful examination of an argument that leads to the only plausible conclusion. Faith operates in that way; it is the inscrutable, undeniable evidence of the unseen. Faith does not need to be corroborated; it is its own validation.

Things hoped for and the things unseen are supported and verified by faith. Faith must be the starting place. It is the very ground on which our hope is built, and it is the only evidence we have for what we cannot see. Even more so than faith being the foundation or the convicting evidence, the believer needs to recognize that faith is.

2 For by it the elders obtained a good report. 3 Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. Hebrews does not really follow the conventions of an ancient letter; it is actually more like a sermon. Its author is not only a writer but is also a preacher. In this verse and those that follow, the sermonic nature of this text shines clearer than anywhere else. The preacher begins a role call that moves through the history of Israel that begins at the creation. However, before the preacher begins that role they illustrate who has access to this faith.

On the one hand, the elders were commended for their faith. The Greek word presbyteroi (pres-BOO-ter-oy) describes elders and can refer both to those who are alive and to distant elders like the ancestors the preacher is about to list. “Elders” depicts those who have gone before us as models of having the faith. This probably included deceased members and older people in the preacher’s congregation who were examples of having the faith. The preacher also illustrates, on the other hand, that those who are to have faith are us now. We see this by the use of the first person plural when the preacher says that by faith “we believe.” Therefore, whether we are elders or not, we share the faith.

The faith that we share is better demonstrated than it is defined. One such demonstration of the faith is our understanding that the universe was put into order by the Word of God. The Greek word aionas (eye-OH-nas) is translated to “universe”, which can also mean “the times.” The Greek verb katarizo (ka-ta-REE-zoh) means more than formed, it means “to put in order and place.” Therefore, faith manifests for believers through an understanding that all the various times of history—including the ones in which we live—were put into place by God’s Word. This allows us to know that God is ultimately in control of our lives regardless of how challenging our situations may currently seem.

Many Jewish teachers believed the material universe was created according to God's invisible pattern that is exemplified in His Word or wisdom. By faith, we believe that God created everything out of nothing. With each creation, God "saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21).

Our faith in God's ability to create via speech allows us to know that things that are seen came into existence by things that cannot be seen (i.e. God's Word). This reveals a deep truth that faith uncovers. This truth is that something that cannot be seen is ultimately in control of the world, and as believers, we recognize that God is that unseen force that organizes the world. Even more importantly, we understand that God is working in our lives even when we cannot see it. In times when this is hard to see, it is particularly relevant, because our faith should remind us that the very world we live in was brought into existence by what cannot be seen. And the One who brought it into existence is still operating on our behalves.

4 By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh. The preacher continues his sermon by demonstrating the faith of key figures from the beginning of Genesis. He begins with the first example of faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible, Abel. (He skipped Adam for obvious reasons.) He interprets Abel as offering a better sacrifice than his brother Cain because he offered it by faith. Abel serves as an example to assure believers that whenever they offer their gifts to God through faith, their efforts cannot be destroyed. Even though Cain killed Abel, Cain's violence did not prevent Abel's faith from continuing to speak. Even though people may not recognize the importance of a believer's faithful sacrifice, that does not prevent the sacrifice from still being meaningful. Others' lack of appreciation certainly does not prevent the sacrifice from being effective. Even more importantly, their dismissal of the sacrifice does not prevent God from seeing and honoring it.

5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. 6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. The next figure that the preacher discusses is Enoch, whose life only receives 4 verses of attention in Genesis 5:21-24. Enoch was one of only two recorded biblical characters who never died (Genesis 5:24). This is how the word "translated" has been interpreted, implying that Enoch did not die, but was carried off to be with God. However, his life provoked many questions, because Genesis 5:24 states that "he was not; for God took him." The preacher in Hebrews recognizes that the reason Enoch was taken by God is that he pleased God and what ultimately pleases God is faith. The preacher so forcefully believes this truth that the sermon suggests that the opposite must also be true—non-faith displeases God. The preacher proclaims "without faith it is impossible to please [God]."

This makes sense because, as noted above, faith is the very foundation for hope and the inscrutable convicting evidence for the unseen. If one is to hope that the unseen God rewards people, then one must have faith to please God or to even encounter God. Faith makes the whole system work and without it, not only can one not please God but they do not even care

whether the Organizer of Times is pleased at all. Faith is important for believers to make sense of a world that consistently attempts to crush hope and limit humans to the narrow options of what they can see.

Verse 6 contains several key points as they relate to faith: 1) the essential quality of faith (without it, it is “impossible to please him”); 2) the importance of our belief in the existence of God (we must “believe that he is”); and 3) the importance of expecting a reward from Him (we must believe that God “is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him”).

The word *pistis* (Gk. PEES-tees) is most commonly translated “faith,” but here the use of the related verb *pisteuo* (pees-TYOU-oh) is obscured by its translation as “to believe.” “To believe” could just as easily be translated as “to have faith,” because faith is belief. The object of our Christian faith is God. We are rewarded as we diligently seek and set our expectations upon Him.

7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith. Although Noah lived during a time of great disobedience, he heeded God’s warning. Although there had never been a need for a ship the size of the ark, Noah built what God instructed him to. His entire family was saved as a result of him listening to God even though he was not able to actually see what God had said to him. In line with our discussion on verse 3, Noah’s understanding that the world was ordered by God’s word allowed him to recognize God’s word. Noah is an example of trusting God’s word even when the opposite seems true. The very salvation of our families and communities could be connected to our obedience to God’s message to do something that has never been done before.

The preacher of Hebrews also says that Noah’s heeding of God’s warning allowed him to condemn the world. The Greek word behind “condemn” is *katakrienen* (ka-ta-KREE-nen) and means “to judge negatively.” As Noah was building the ark, others may have judged him as radical, fanatic, or unhinged. However, his obedience to God allowed him to have the last word. Therefore, he needed to remain faithful even in a hostile environment where people could not see or understand him. His faith allowed him not only to persevere but to be able to see himself vindicated against everyone and every system that discredited him.

Noah’s faith positioned him to be an heir of justice. The Greek word *dikaioisune* (dee-kai-oh-SOO-nay) is often translated as righteousness, but it also means justice. Noah’s faith led him to heed God’s voice in a world that questioned his values. Noah found favor in God’s eyes and was a man of justice (Genesis 6:8, 9). In a community, nation, and world where it seemed that injustice was inescapable, Noah chose to be a representative of justice. What fueled his commitment to justice was his faith. Noah’s faith impacted how he acted in his present time, and it was also forward-looking. That is why the preacher in Hebrews refers to Noah as an heir of justice. An heir is one who has not yet received their inheritance, but they can anticipate it when their time comes. Although Noah did not know exactly when God’s justice would manifest in the world, he still organized his life by faith to live justly in anticipation of God fulfilling God’s

commitment to him. Similarly, we are called to live by faith and pursue justice in our world. Even when it seems far away, we are to keep trusting that God will keep His word to us.

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. The preacher of Hebrews then turns to the father of the faithful himself, Abraham. Here, Abraham's faith is expressed in terms of obedience and trust. Abraham answered his call, though he did not know at the time how far and how much God would call him. Even though God knew who Abraham truly was and who he would become, Abraham did not know. That did not prevent Abraham from going. He, like Noah, anticipated an inheritance even though he did not know where God was going to take him or how God was going to do what God had called him to do. His faith was not in knowing how God would, but his faith was in knowing that God would.

Like Abraham, we are called to trust God leading us even in uncertainty, not because we are sure of the destination, but because we are sure of the One who called us by name. By faith, we recognize that God knows us individually and has called us particularly.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. 15 And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. 16 But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. The preacher of Hebrews acknowledges that faith is not rooted in receiving what is hoped for or in seeing what cannot be seen. If that were the case, then the faith of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and others were baseless, because they died without actually seeing the fruit of their faith. Instead, the preacher of Hebrews uses immigrant and stranger imagery to portray the life of the faithful—those seeking opportunity but facing adversity. The faithful are depicted as those who choose to not focus on what they have left behind but instead concentrate on the hope that lays before them because their hope for better outweighs the risk of losing comfortable mediocrity.

They are those who are looking for a better country. This need not only apply to immigrants and refugees, but it could even apply to so-called citizens as well, who like Noah to seek justice in their nation and still look for a better country. The writer of Hebrews is attempting to stir up the congregants to recognize that this world is not our ultimate home.

The land that the examples of faith were seeking was not the Promised Land of Canaan. Nor is the land that they seek comparable to a modern Western idea of a nation-state.

The land that the heroes of faith are looking for is a heavenly land—a city that God Himself has prepared for them. The land that holds the fulfillment of our faith exists outside of the constraints of time and space and human engineering. Our faith must be completely rooted in that which we cannot see because we know by faith that the things we cannot see actually brought into existence the limited amount that we can see. The foundation of our hope cannot

be limited by human systems and ideas. It has to be based in a faith that recognizes a God who put the times together through God's word, and it is that same word that continues to honor, warn, and call God's people today.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Love of Money, Root of Evil
(1 Timothy 6:6-10)

TUESDAY

Control Your Own Body
(1 Thessalonians 4:1-7)

WEDNESDAY

Abraham, Father of the Faithful
(Acts 7:2-7)

THURSDAY

Worthy Examples of the Faithful
(Hebrews 11:4-7, 17-27)

FRIDAY

Actions of Faith in Daily Life
(Hebrews 13:1-9, 17-19)

SATURDAY

Like Jesus, Offer Sacrifices to God
(Hebrews 13:10-16)

SUNDAY

The Living Actions of Faith
(Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16)