

The Meaning of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-8, 13-16

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God."

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷ By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. . . .

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, 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; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Theme Statement

As we identify the faith contributions of the heroes in Hebrews 11, we can also value the people in our lives whose faith shapes, or shaped, their daily lives. This helps us grow in our potential to become faith heroes.

Exploring the Word

The King James Version translates Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Substance has a helpful connotation suggesting something you can hold. Evidence is equally physical. Of course, faith is a concept. It does, however, take on a presence in our lives that informs our thoughts and actions.

Hebrews 11:1-3 Faith and hope

The church to which Hebrews was written was facing tough times. From without, there was persecution. From within, there was concern over the Messiah. Yes, he was resurrected, but in ascending to God he had seemed to have left his church. Doubt was surfacing and fear was growing. The anonymous writer of this letter wanted to help the recipients reconnect with "things that are not visible" but that are just as real as those that are seen.

Hebrews 11:4-7 Abel, Enoch, and Noah

The writer points to faith as the difference between Abel's offering and that of his brother. While there is no indication how Cain's offering came up short, review of Genesis 4 says Abel brought the best of his flock. This action of trust also showed respect and gratitude, making faith an attitude reflected in one's response to God.

Enoch was the grandfather of Noah and the father of Methuselah. In Genesis 5 we read that he lived a holy and faithful life. Genesis 5:24 says that "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him." Many interpret this to mean Enoch never died because he had faith.

In a time of overwhelming violence and evil, Noah embarked upon a seemingly impossible project because he trusted that God had called him to it (Genesis 6-9).

Interestingly, in verse 6 the writer simplifies faith as belief in God's existence, but pairs it with the reward that comes from seeking God.

Hebrews 11:8 The faith of Abraham

This verse is probably the clearest word picture of faith. Abraham obeyed God's call to receive God's promise, not knowing where he was going. It would be like having an acquaintance program your GPS and fill your gas tank so you could begin a journey to a destination unknown to you, and then you take off. It's all about trust and obedience.

The readers of Hebrews would be aware of the humanity of Abraham. He and Sarah were the founders of the faith that would become Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham was not without failure. He took the promise into his own hands more than once, having a child with Sarah's servant

Hagar and lying about his relationship to Sarah so two kings wouldn't kill him (Genesis 12:10-20; 16; 20). Abraham was seen as a faith hero in spite of these actions.

Hebrews 11:13-16 Greeting the promise

Abraham, the father of many nations, had only one child with Sarah. He died before seeing the realization of God's promise in Genesis 15 that their offspring would be as numerous as the stars. That promise, however improbable it seemed, was believed. It informed Abraham's actions.

The scriptures say little about Enoch. Holy and faithful when surrounded by sin and violence, he never died. Tradition says he was taken straight to God's presence. This example of faith offered hope to those who heard his story.

The readers of Hebrews would know much more of Noah's story. He lived in the midst of wickedness and had to take dramatic and socially questionable action—building the ark—in anticipation of God's promise to save his family. Genesis 6 describes Noah as righteous (“the righteous live by their faith,” Habakkuk 2:4; see also Romans 1:17). After hearing God's call and extensive instructions, “Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him” (Genesis 6:22).

The writer reminds his readers then and us today that there is an everlasting hope that keeps its focus on the grace of God, especially when God's people see signs to the contrary. That is the role of faith; it is the *substance* of things not seen, the *evidence* of things hoped for.

The Word Today

In Western culture, faith is frequently seen as one's agreement with an idea. In the Hebrew culture at the time this letter was written, the first century CE, faith included action based on such acknowledgment.

While there are multiple words in Hebrew for *faith*, the writer's connection of it with Old Testament heroes leans toward *emunah*, from the root word *aman*. It means to securely trust or rely upon. *Aman* is where we get “amen.” When one concludes their prayer with “amen,” they are saying they have faith in God to hear and answer their prayers. But there is more. They are also saying they are willing to do their part to see those answers realized.

Another word for faith is *qavah*. It can be translated as “hope” or “wait.” When one plants a garden, one doesn't sit passively until the seeds germinate. Tending the garden is an active process, with watering, weeding, and pruning to ensure the crop is good. The growth of the plants is enhanced but not caused by the gardener's actions. The gardener's actions, however, are inspired by faith and hope.

The New Testament Greek noun and verb for “faith” come from the same root word: the noun is *pistis*, the verb, *pisteuo*. In English we tend to think of faith as a noun rather than a verb, which indicates action. Even “believe” and “trust” seem more passive in English. We today can claim a definition of faith that includes active demonstration as a response to God's grace.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Which of the following do you associate with hope?

waiting	challenges	strength
tenacity	binding	endurance
expectation	lingering	gathering
anticipation	tarrying	

2. Who do you know who has a strong faith? What about them inspires you?

Exploring the Word

1. Using Bible commentaries and outlines, describe the things that helped the Hebrew Christians believe in Jesus.
2. Genesis 5 tells the family tree that includes Enoch. How might that listing help the Hebrew Christians grow in faith?
3. Hebrews 11 presents “faith” as a verb—that is, as action. How do the heroes named keep it from being a noun—that is, a subject, a thing?
4. In the last session we read in Romans 10:17 that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (NKJV). How has the writer to the Hebrews incorporated that understanding in this letter?

The Word Today

1. How do you express faith in your daily life?
2. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9), Jesus talks about the power of faith. How do you see waiting and hope in that parable?
3. How would you define faith after considering this study?

Closing Prayer

*Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and shield.*

*Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.*

*Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you. Psalm 33:20-22*

Further Study

2 Corinthians 5:6-9

Daily Readings

M. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

T. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7

W. Acts 7:2-7

T. Hebrews 11:4-7, 17-27

F. Hebrews 13:1-9, 17-19

S. Hebrews 13:10-16

S. Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Memorization

Hebrews 11:1

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.