

# Hebrews 11 Part 1

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As Ephesians 5 tells us, God expects us to understand His word, and He has given everyone who is accountable the logical tools to make this understanding possible. However, this doesn't mean that Bible study is easy, and one of the things that makes it most difficult is our own human tendency to err. We impose what we have always been taught on the text, whether the text justifies that teaching or not, or we assume the text's meaning without considering its context.

We see a striking example of this in the way that many of our denominational friends think about faith. They read Paul's discussion of faith and works in Romans 4, which teaches that works do not save, but they draw the conclusion that faith does not work. All Scriptural evidence to the contrary, they argue that baptism is not for the forgiveness of sins because they think that if it were for the forgiveness of sins, baptism would earn salvation as a work of merit. We understand, of course, that baptism does save, not because the act of getting wet has some great spiritual merit, but because God made baptism one of the conditions of our salvation. If we believe Him, we will be baptized.

This connection between faith and obedience, which is so repugnant to so many in the denominational world, is one of the key themes of the Bible. Nowhere in Scripture does God urge us to believe and then do nothing. Instead, over and over again, He urges us to believe and then to act in accordance with that belief. We don't have to obey perfectly. That's what the grace of Jesus is for. However, we do need to live lives of faith that show that we do believe. We need to faithfully obey, like the righteous men of old did. Let's read about their faith in Hebrews 11, Part 1.

## Faith and the Ancient Heroes

The Hebrews writer begins this discussion with a **DEFINITION** of faith. This appears in Hebrews 11:1-2. At the end of the last chapter, the writer distinguished between those who shrink back to destruction and those who have faith to the preserving of the soul. Even before the chapter starts, we see that faith leads people to live differently than faithlessness does. According to the writer, they live differently for two reasons. They believe in something that they cannot see, and they hope to attain it. In the case of Christians, our faith is in God and His promise of eternal life, and our hope is that through His grace, we can inherit it. This is why we do what we do—because of something we have not seen, and in this life, will never see. However, this does not mean that our faith is blind or irrational. We have great reason to believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and our faith is founded on understanding its evidence.

The righteous who served God thousands of years ago shared this same faith, and because of this faith, they gained the reward of the approval of God. However, as we will see repeatedly, their faith was not a do-nothing faith. Because they believed in God, every one of them obeyed Him, and it was their faith displayed in action that pleased Him.

Our faith begins with believing in God's work at **THE CREATION**. The Hebrews writer explains in Hebrews 11:3. We know much more about the physical universe than did the people of Bible times, but for all of the scientists out there and all of their hypotheses, I have yet to see a good explanation for the creation that does not involve God. We know that at some point in the past, there was no universe, then all of a sudden, there was a universe, and there is no natural mechanism that can account for that. The hot new argument among astrophysicists these days is that there is some kind of "mother universe" out in an alternate reality that goes around spawning "daughter universes", and our universe is just one of the daughter universes. There is not and cannot be a shred of evidence for this argument. The scientists made it up out of whole cloth. Ironically enough, their refusal to admit the existence of a supernatural God has led them to suppose a supernatural mother universe that is just as unscientific as belief in God is. That's all as contradictory as can be, and it makes much more sense for us to accept that the worlds were framed by the word of God.

From there, the Hebrews writer shifts to a focus on the faith of one man, the man **ABEL**. We read about him in Hebrews 11:4. The writer's words here actually imply something about what happened that isn't in the Genesis account. The only way that this makes sense is if God told Cain and Abel that He wanted animal sacrifices, Abel believed God and acted accordingly, and Cain didn't. If both Cain and Abel were merely guessing about what God wanted, there would have been no faith involved. Cain didn't take God's word for what He wanted, but Abel did. As a result, God commended Abel, and when Cain murdered him, listened to Abel's blood crying from the ground and condemned Cain.

Today, if we have faith, we will also believe God when He tells us what sacrifices He wants us to offer. The Bible is quite clear about what acts of worship are acceptable to God. Only as we obey Him will we offer a better sacrifice.

Next in line, we learn about the faith of **ENOCH**. We see his story in Hebrews 11:5-6. Like Abel, Enoch is only a minor character in the Old Testament, but his story is significant because he was so good that God spared him the agonies of death and took him directly to heaven. The word "faith" is not used in the Genesis account of Enoch's story, but the Hebrews writer makes the point that it must have been there. Nobody, not even Enoch, draws near to God by accident. Instead, it happens because they believe and because they diligently seek for Him.

As was true for Enoch is also true for us. We don't please God by accident. We don't go to heaven by accident. Instead, we gain the reward of life with Him because we believe Him and because we seek him. This isn't the leisure-time hide-and-go-seek kind of seeking. Instead, the Greek word that is translated as "seek" here is translated in Luke 11:51 as "require", and in context there, it's talking about God requiring justice for the blood of the prophets from those who killed them. That same single-mindedness, that same refusal to be put off, is the way that we need to seek for God. We need to require Him in our lives, to be satisfied with nothing less, to accept no substitutes, to be incapable of rest until we have what we're looking for. If we seek God in this way, we will surely receive the joys of eternity from Him.

After this, we come to the example of **NOAH**. His actions are summarized in Hebrews 11:7. Of all of these situations, his might be the closest to ours. Like Noah, we have been warned of a calamity that will overtake the human race. Like Noah, God has told us what we have to do to prepare for the disaster. He had to build an ark to survive the flood; we must obey God's plan of salvation to endure the day of judgment. Noah obeyed because of His faith, and if we have faith, we will also obey. As a result of that, our lives will condemn those who do not believe and consequently disobey. On the day of judgment, I'm sure that the lost will try to offer all kinds of excuses. They will say that God's word was too hard to understand or too hard to do, so they shouldn't be held accountable. In response, God is going to point to all the faithful Christians who did understand and obey, and say, "You should have been like them."

### **Abraham and Exile**

As he continues through the book of Genesis, the writer next comes to **ABRAHAM**. Look with me at Hebrews 11:8-10. To me, this is one of the most fascinating passages in the Bible. When God called Abraham out of Haran, Abraham didn't know where he was going. He left his family and his life behind to go live in a tent in the land of Canaan. God had promised that land to Abraham's descendants one day, but in reality, even that promised land wasn't the one that Abraham was seeking. Instead, without fully knowing it, Abraham spent his life journeying toward heaven.

Today, all of us need to be Abrahams. We need to leave everything in the world behind so that we can spend our lives in search of the city that has foundations. Some people's Abraham challenges are obvious. I've known plenty of people who knew full well that becoming a Christian would cause a split with their families. Some of them shared the faith of Abraham and obeyed the gospel anyway; some didn't. However, Abraham moments don't only happen at the beginning of our walk with God. Every now and again, God will say to all of us, "If you want to obey Me, you'll have to leave that behind." All of those choices are as hard as the devil can make them, but if we want the reward, we have to do what's right. In the final analysis, the question is: do we believe God enough to give up everything, or don't we?

Likewise, we have a lot to learn from the story of Abraham's wife **SARAH**. The Hebrews writer focuses on one aspect of her story in Hebrews 11:11-12. As he presents things here, Isaac's birth was the result not only of Abraham's faith, but of Sarah's faith too. The inclusion of Sarah in this roll of heroes adds a reassuringly human element to the idea of faith. As the record of Genesis tells us, when God first announced that Sarah would have a child well after her childbearing years had ended, Sarah replied with incredulous laughter. And yet, despite this momentary weakness, God counted her faithful and rewarded her. This is important to us because there are many times when our faith bears more resemblance to Sarah's than to Jesus'. Few indeed are the Christians who never experience moments of spiritual weakness or doubt. However, God doesn't hold those momentary lapses against us. We don't have to get a perfect score on our faith any more than we have to get a perfect score on our works. Despite those struggles, we can still please Him.

The writer then describes all these people of faith as **STRANGERS AND EXILES**. We read this in Hebrews 11:13. Abraham and Sarah and the patriarchs all died before God fulfilled His promises to them by sending Jesus to earth. They had only a very dim idea of who Jesus would be and what He would do. To us, that doesn't sound like much of a promise. Who cares what God is going to do with our remote descendants 2000 years after we die? Abraham and Sarah could not have disagreed more. They weren't concerned with the physical world and what would happen here. They were concerned with the spiritual realm and what God would do there. Because their focus was on the spiritual, they could never be more than exiles on the earth. They knew it, and their lives acknowledged it.

Is the same true for us? Are we strangers and exiles in our lives on earth, patiently waiting until God calls us to where we belong? Or have we gotten so comfortable here that we don't feel any need to go there? Earth has many joys for us, but we cannot live for even the most innocent of those joys. We must live instead for the promise of God.

This promise concerns our real **HOMELAND**. The writer explains this idea in Hebrews 11:14-16. We can tell what Abraham and Sarah cared about because of what they did. They weren't interested in going back to an easier life in Mesopotamia. They were willing to live an uncertain existence between the cities and the desert if that's what it took to inherit the promise of God. They may not even have known it, but the homeland they were truly seeking was heaven, and because of their faith, God was willing to accept them as His people and reward them.

We must show the same faith today if we want God to reward us. We can't be interested in going back where we came from. We can't owe allegiance to anything on earth. Instead, we must continually fix our eyes on heaven.