

# Hebrews 11, Part 2

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Even though as disciples of Jesus, every one of us is called to follow Jesus, no two of us do that in exactly the same way. My path to discipleship doesn't look like yours, and yours doesn't look like the Christian's two pews over. This is true for two main reasons. First, no two of us have the same array of God-given talents and skills. I heard a story once about a brother who wanted to be a preacher, but every time he got up to preach, he got such bad stage fright that he fainted dead away. Clearly, God intended for him to serve in other ways than proclaiming the gospel from the pulpit.

Second, no two of us are in exactly the same circumstances. We are all at different stages of our lives, with different jobs, different family situations, and different friends. Nor are our situations the same as Christians who lived a hundred years ago, or Christians who lived 2000 years ago. When we listen to some of the stories that the older brethren here tell about growing up without indoor plumbing, or without more than two pairs of overalls to their name, it makes us realize how wealthy all of us today are, and that wealth is both a blessing and a challenge. Similarly, Christians in the first century lived under governments that were hostile to the gospel, but our right to worship as we please is enshrined in the highest laws of our government, and as upset as we might get about high taxes and bureaucratic inefficiency, we must remember that at least our rulers don't haul us off to prison for worshiping God, and for that we should be thankful.

However, despite all of these differences, the lives of every servant of God follow the same basic pattern. They believe, their faith leads them to obey, and the combination of faith plus obedience makes them pleasing to God. Even today, we have much to learn from the faith of the righteous of old. Let's learn about them in Hebrews 11, Part 2.

## Genesis through Joshua

This section of the chapter begins with a final return to the story of **ABRAHAM**. This appears in Hebrews 11:17-19. Many in the denominational world want to separate faith and works, as though those were two logically distinct things. Interestingly enough, though, the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is cited here as an example of faith, but it's cited in James 2 as an example of works. In reality, the story is both. It is an example of faith that leads to obedience, and it is an example of works performed by one who believed God. We need both in our lives today.

Interestingly enough, because of Abraham's faith, even though he was wrong, he was right. God had promised Abraham that he would have descendants through Isaac, and Abraham believed God. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, for many people, that would really have called into question God's earlier promise. Not so for Abraham. Abraham had such confidence in God that he was willing to offer up his own son on the altar, because he believed that if Isaac were to die, God would still carry out his promise by raising Isaac from the dead. Of course, Abraham was mistaken about God's plan. Once God saw that Abraham was willing to go through with the sacrifice, He commanded him to stop. However, despite Abraham's misconception, because of his faith, he still pleased God.

This same faith showed itself in the lives of Abraham's descendants, **ISAAC, JACOB, AND JOSEPH**. We read about them in Hebrews 11:20-22. Isaac and Jacob are commended for essentially the same behavior—blessing their descendants. To us, this is not immediately obvious as an act of faith, but let's think about it for a little bit. In a sense, when Isaac and Jacob died, they died disappointed. God had promised their father Abraham the land of Canaan, and here they were, generations later, but God still hadn't fulfilled His promise, and obviously wasn't going to in their lifetimes. For all of God's fine words, they had gotten nothing, just like Abraham had gotten nothing. Less righteous men might have been tempted to give up on the whole God thing, but not Isaac and Jacob. They passed on their blessing to their descendants, as if to say, "I didn't see God's promise, and you might not see God's promise either, but somewhere down the line, even if it's our great-great-grandchildren, God will carry out His word."

We see similar faith from Joseph. Remember, of course, that when Joseph died, he was the second most powerful man in one of the greatest nations on earth. Egypt had been good to Joseph, and we might expect that he would be content to be buried there. Not so. What mattered to Joseph was not the personal success that he had enjoyed. What mattered was God's promise. He knew that someday God would give Canaan to his descendants, and he wanted to be buried in the promised land, even if the Israelites would have to dig him up and re-bury him to make that happen. Four hundred years later, it happened just as Joseph had said, and they buried him in the land of promise.

Before that point is reached, though, the Hebrews writer turns his attention to the faith of **MOSES**. Look with me at Hebrews 11:23-28. In many ways, Moses faced the same choice that Joseph faced. On the one hand, he had the certain riches of Egypt; on the other hand, he had the invisible promise of God. The path of Egypt promised a life of ease and pleasure. The path of God promised exile, danger, and, whether Moses knew it or not, 40 years of leading some of the most foolish, ungrateful people ever to walk the face of the earth. Just about anyone would have chosen to remain part of the Egyptian royal house, but Moses wasn't just anyone. He chose to strike back at Egyptian oppression, even

when that caused him to forfeit his standing with Pharaoh. He lived as an exile for 40 years, and returned to the land of his youth when God ordered him back, all because of his faith, because of his conviction that God would fulfill His ancient promise to His people. When God told him, “Put blood on your doorposts and lintels, or else I will kill your firstborn as I am about to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians,” Moses, who had never seen such a calamitous plague, believed Him and obeyed. In short, Moses lived a life that would make no sense to the unbeliever. From beginning to end, he made choices that had no earthly benefit, and he made them because of his faith.

The Hebrews writer next cites examples of the faith of **THE PEOPLE**. We read about these examples in Hebrews 11:29-31. They trusted in God to protect them even though He literally led them through the bottom of the sea. When they stood before the mighty walls of Jericho, with no siege equipment and no obvious way of getting in, God told them to march around the walls for seven days, and the walls would fall. In earthly terms, that is a nonsensical plan. No fortified city, before or since, has ever been taken because the invading army marched in a circle around it. However, the Israelites believed God, they followed His plan, and the walls fell. Even Rahab, who could have trusted in the strength of Jericho like her countrymen did, chose to trust God. She risked her own life by protecting the spies from the search party, but because of her faith, ultimately she and her family, alone of all the inhabitants of Jericho, were spared.

Throughout all of these different stories, we see one theme, over and over again: faith does. It doesn't sit there and do nothing. It obeys, even when that obedience is heart-wrenching, even when it appears totally irrational to human wisdom. It is true that we are justified by faith, as all of those righteous people were justified by their faith, but the only way we can gauge the faith that we possess is by looking at the lives that we lead. Are we willing to put the things that we love the most on the altar and sacrifice them for Christ? Do our lives show that we believe that God will fulfill His promise, even after we die? Are we willing to surrender wealth and ease and pleasure for poverty, toil, and pain, if that's what God requires from us? That is the walk that displays our faith, and if we shrink back from doing those things, even if we claim to believe, it shows that our belief is a self-delusion. Only the faithful life reveals the faithful heart.

### Judges through Us

From here, the Hebrews writer moves to discuss in general terms some of the other **HEROES** of faith. We read this in Hebrews 11:32-34. First off, I can't help but notice that the Hebrews writer displays one of those traits that make preachers beloved—the awareness that time is about to fail him. It's evident from what he says, though, that he could have gone on to provide many times the number of examples that he has already cited. The whole rest of the Old Testament is filled with examples of men who faced challenges from being thrown into a fiery furnace to facing the wrath of a wicked king. All of those men, despite their flaws, overcame those challenges through their faith.

Today, we can have as much confidence that our faith will lead us to victory too. We may not be thrown into a den of hungry lions, but all of us have difficulties in our lives. We may be dogged by a particularly persistent sin. We may have to contend with family members who are hostile to the gospel. We may face struggles at work or school. Regardless of the situation, though, we must remember to trust in God, because we shall overcome through Him.

Of course, the Hebrews writer is careful not to paint too rosy a picture of what trusting in God may bring. He next turns his attention to the **MARTYRS** who also followed their faith. He describes some of the things that happened to them in Hebrews 11:35-38. Some of these incidents we can link to a specific Bible passage. For instance, we know that the prophet Jeremiah was imprisoned for years because of his determination to preach God's message. Others, though, are a mystery to us. We don't even know the name of the one who was sawn in two for his faith.

One thing is clear, though. Even though this section describes some grim circumstances for God's people, even though these martyrs appear to have been defeated in earthly terms, it is true no less of them that they attained the victory through faith. They may not have gotten a second glance from the persecutors who killed them, but God knew who they were, and their deaths glorified Him. We also may reach the point in our lives when we obtain the victory not by conquering, but by holding on. This world can inflict all sorts of cruelties on us. If we come to the close of our lives, and we face a long, debilitating illness with no hope left, that's a bitter pill to swallow. I know that some of our shut-ins have reached the point where they would prefer to die, but that stubborn heart keeps on beating. When we face that final, grim time, we must remember to hold the assurance of our hope firm to the end. It is appointed to men once to die, but that does not mean that God has abandoned us. If we are faithful until death, we will surely gain the crown of life.

After this, though, the Hebrews writer reaches a surprising **PUNCH LINE**. Read with me in Hebrews 11:39-40. All of these great heroes of faith, men who accomplished mighty works in God's name, men who remained faithful to that name, even through suffering and death, lived in hope of something that they did not see. Despite all that they did, the salvation that was promised to them only appeared to us. Without Jesus, they would have lived for nothing.

This should help us understand how wonderful our hope is. Great men like Abraham longed to catch a glimpse of what we know fully. The point here is plain. If men like that were willing to live and die for a joy they did not attain, now that we know that joy fully, what should we do? How much greater should our efforts be than theirs?