



Sunday School Lesson for July 18, 2004.
Released on: July 16, 2004.

Study: Hebrews 11: 1—40 "Roll Call of the Faithful"
Questions and answers below.

TIME: About A.D. 67
PLACE: Unknown

Hebrews 11: 1—2, 4—13

- 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 testimony.
- 4 By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts, and through it he being dead still speaks.
- 5 By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him, for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.
- 6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.
- 7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteous which is according to faith.
- 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.
- 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;
- 10 For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.
- 11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.
- 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

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

14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

LESSON BACKGROUND

The Bible's Hall of Fame is set apart by other halls of fame in America that honor sports, heroes, entertainers, and achievers in many different walks of life—because it centers not on human achievement but on faith in what God can do. The members of God's Hall of Fame are marked by a humble sense of their limitations and a heartfelt confidence in God's goodness and grace.

The true blessing of this fact is that Christians today can also become inducted into God's Hall of Fame. How? Hebrews reminds us that others will remember our lives in certain ways after we are gone.

Today's lesson will help us to understand the importance of leaving our own legacies of faith to those that follow. Eternal life—both our own and that of those who come later—will depend on it!

The book of Hebrews is a book that warns (Hebrews 2:1-4; 3:7-19; etc.). We don't know all the reasons that the readers may have had for wanting to abandon Christianity, but fear of persecution or hardship is very likely.

The writer of this epistle marshals several arguments to convince the readers to remain true to their Christian faith. The new covenant is better than the old in having a better high priest, a better sacrifice, and a better hope. Now in Hebrews 11 the inspired writer turns to Jewish history to demonstrate that great heroes of the past had faced all kinds of challenges to their faith. But they had prevailed in spite of the danger.

Logical arguments are useful in any discussion of the Christian faith, even essential. But perhaps the most forceful argument for the power of faith in God is to look at the examples of those who have triumphed over all kinds of difficulties in their efforts to remain true to him. The author of Hebrews selects a variety of past heroes of the faith to make just such an argument. In many ways Abraham is the greatest of those examples.

The example of Abraham would be especially forceful to Jewish Christians, who looked to him as their father in the faith.

Faith Defined (Hebrews 11:1–2)

1. What does the word "substance" mean in Hebrews 11:1?

Verse one is not a definition of faith, but rather a description of what faith does. "Substance" means essence or reality, so faith treats "things hoped for" as reality. Under normal physical conditions we cannot see the air we breathe, but we can feel it and see the devastating result of what the winds of a tornado can leave behind.

Another very early worldly teaching that most of us are familiar with is the "Big Bang" theory that rejects God as Creator of all. Hebrews 11:3 tells us that, "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible." Simply said, faith teaches that an invisible God created a very visible and vast universe.

We are taught that biblical faith is a confidence so strong that it is as if the things we long for were right before our eyes. Accordingly, a person of faith believes in unseen spiritual realities as much as if they were visible to his physical eye. This same notion holds true for believing the Word of God. We believe because we have faith in what we hear. We cannot prove God to anyone.

Salvation is a matter of having faith in the Gospel: Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus died for the sins of the world, Jesus rose with all power—defeating physical death and spiritual death and giving eternal life to those who believe, and He's coming back to redeem His own. These beliefs are what sustain us—through faith. Eternal life is contingent upon faith!

2. How is the biblical idea of hope different from the world's definition? (Hebrews 11:1)

The world weighs "hope" as some far-fetched, desperate, "I sure hope this works," vague kind of wishful thinking. Yes, it is an optimistic outlook of what might happen, but a believer's hope is built on the promises of God and His redeeming purpose. This biblical brand of hope is as certain as the fact that God is trustworthy and good. The Christian is able to transfer the end results of an event to God—upon whose promises are sturdy enough to be stood.

3. What does it mean to obtain a "good report" or "testimony?" (Hebrews 11:2)

The believers ("elders") of the Old Testament were said to have obtained a "good report" from God because of their faith in Him—something that God had continuously admonished and required from His followers throughout history. Faith was the means by which these ancestors were declared to be righteous in God's sight (Genesis 15:6), and thus the recipients of God's approval.

We are fortunate today that we do not have an excuse to have a "blind faith." We have the Bible before us to provide the stories of our ancestors in the Old and New Testaments as examples of what unwavering faith will do. There should not be any doubt in our minds about God's goodness and "faithfulness" to His children as we read about the faith and blessed lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham in today's lesson.

Faith Illustrated (Hebrews 11: 4—13)

4. What purpose did the life of Abel serve? (Hebrews 11:4)

The account of Cain and Abel is found in Genesis 4:1-15. Both brothers brought sacrifices to God. Cain brought "of the fruits of the soil," while Abel brought "fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flocks." God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but rejected Cain's. This so angered Cain that he murdered his brother.

Abel offered his sacrifice by faith with a humble heart, while Cain offered his grudgingly or arrogantly. As a result of his godly example, Abel still speaks to us even though he has been dead for thousands of years.

Hebrews 11: 4 gives us a clue regarding God's viewpoint. We are told that Abel offered a better sacrifice because he was righteous. It is evident that the problem was not with the sacrifice itself, whether animal or grain. The important issue was that of attitude—an issue of acting through faith.

5. In what special way did God bless the faith of Enoch? (Hebrews 11:5,6)

The Enoch spoken of in this verse is the son of Jared and the father of Methuselah. Enoch's story can be found in Genesis 5:21–24, and recounts how the mysterious blessing of his not experiencing death was given by God because of Enoch's great faith. He was honored in this way because his life brought special satisfaction to God.

It is important for us not to get caught up (no pun intended) in the fact that Enoch "walked with God" and did not experience death, but to look beyond this phenomenal event to the truly important matter at hand: rather than walk away from God as people of his day were doing, Enoch walked closely with God while he lived and received the gift of not dying a physical death.

Many people have a knowledge of the existence of God in the sense of His being an intellectually divine being, but they do not know Him as He is revealed in His Word. We revisit the necessity of trusting God to be Who He says He is; of having faith that He is the one true and living God.

6. What are the two crucial components of faith that make a relationship with God possible? (Hebrews 11:6)

This verse is one of the most well-known and quoted of all Scriptures. God is "pleased" with those who have "faith" in Him. All those who "come" to or seek God must believe that He is who He says He is, and must believe that He will "reward" those who earnestly "seek" Him.

This very important verse indicates the reason that the actions of Abel and Enoch are worthy of being mentioned in this context of "faith." Abel and Enoch did not simply "believe" that God "exists." Belief is important, but it does not go far enough by itself (see James 2:19). Abel and Enoch were among the few that "earnestly" sought God. As a result, they did indeed "please" God.

All of us are painfully aware that there are times and situations when it is difficult to see any tangible evidence that God really does reward his followers. But with the evidence of history and the eye of faith we can look beyond our immediate situations and see the eternal blessings that he has in store for us.

7. How did Noah demonstrate that he was a man of faith? (Hebrews 11: 7)

The story of Noah is another legendary illustration of faith (see Genesis 6:11–22). The Gatlin Brothers sing a biblically-unblemished song entitled, "Noah Found Grace in the Eyes of the Lord" that comes straight from Genesis 6:8. When God looked upon the world in Noah's day, He saw that it was terribly evil and corrupt. So He made the decision to cleanse it with a flood (Genesis 6:11-17). We don't know exactly how God spoke to Noah, but we do know that He ordered him to build "an ark."

Noah "did everything just as God commanded him" without any record of hesitation or questioning (Genesis 6:22).

Part of God's message to Noah was a warning "about things not yet seen." This is where faith comes in, and Noah really demonstrated it when he set out to build such a huge vessel. This was a tremendous undertaking, and most likely he had to carry it out in an atmosphere of ridicule from friends and neighbors. Nor was it a simple weekend project. By some calculations, this task took decades to complete. During

that time this "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5) was unable to save any others except his own family (Genesis 7:13; 1 Peter 3:20).

It took a lot of faith to continue preaching under those discouraging circumstances.

The obedience of Noah is a lesson reinforced upon us today—to those of us who share the Gospel of Jesus Christ without immediately seeing the "fruits of (our) labor." Be encouraged today, brother and sister, to continue doing what God has instructed you to do. Stay focused on God's reward to you... promises of blessings.

8. Why did the author of Hebrews devote extra attention to the life of Abraham? (Hebrews 11:8–10)

Abraham is regarded as the "father of the faithful" (Galatians 3:6–9, and 28). How many of you remember the words to the children's action song, "Father Abraham?" "Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you (so are you). So let's all praise the Lord!"

What a fun but straightforward way to place emphasis on Abraham's obedience to God's command to "go." Abraham did not know where "he was going," yet he still placed his trust in God and went. Faith can also mean obediently stepping out into the unknown as Abraham did; whereby God rewarded his faith by considering Abraham righteous because of it (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-12).

Abraham was able to hold fast to his faith through many let-downs and uncertainties in life because he was looking forward to more than just an earthly inheritance. The cities of man will all crumble, but the eternal city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, has real foundations, ones that can never be shaken and will last forever. Abraham—the man of faith—was living by "evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

9. What circumstances acted as tests of Abraham and Sarah's faith? (Hebrews 11: 11–12)

It may surprise us that Sarah is mentioned as a model of a faithful person. In fact, she doubted God's promise that Abraham would have heirs through her. At one point she encouraged her husband to take her handmaid as a secondary wife so that Sarah could "build a family through her" (Genesis 16:1-3). Later, when God sent three messengers to Abraham, Sarah overheard them tell him that she would have a son. On hearing it, she "laughed to herself" (Genesis 18:12).

Yet at some point her faith began to grow. Perhaps her attitude began to change as she watched Abraham faithfully try to carry out the Lord's mandate. We need to realize that our faith can be contagious. When others see our faithful lives, they can catch some of that faith. Again, our lives affect those around us... good examples or not so good examples, we are living our legacies.

As a result of God's power and Abraham's faith, his descendants became "as numerous as the stars in the sky" and as the "sand" which is "on the seashore." The fulfillment of this promise is so important that this imagery is used in several Bible passages (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 32:12; Exodus 32:13; Deuteronomy 1:10; 10:22). Paul discusses Abraham's profound faith in this regard in Romans 4:18,19.

10. How should the fact that we are strangers in this world affect the way we live? (Hebrews 11: 13)

Foresight is a vital part of faith. That is what it means for these heroes to be able to "see the things promised . . . from a distance." For example, Jesus said that "Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day" (John 8:56). The way these heroes lived their lives acknowledges the fact that they were "aliens and strangers on earth" (cf. Genesis 23:4; 47:9; Psalm 39:12). As Christians we also are to acknowledge that we are but strangers and aliens on this earth (cf. 1 Peter 2:11).

We know that we are only here temporarily; our eternal home is with God.

A last musical tie to end this week's lesson, and to remind us of our eternal residence: "This world is not my home. I'm just passing through. If heaven's not my home. Then Lord what shall I do? The angels beckon me at heaven's open gate. I can't feel at home in this world anymore."

CONCLUSION

Occasionally we hear people say, "I don't take anything on faith." This is an absurd statement, for every day in countless ways we live by faith. For example, when we receive our direct deposit pay stub, we have faith that the money actually went to the bank. When we approach a bridge while driving, do we stop, pull off the road, and check the safety of the bridge? Of course not! Without even a thought we drive across the bridge.

We have faith in the engineers who planned the bridge and the crews who built it. Do we check the sturdiness of the legs and bottom of each and every chair or seat before sitting down on it? Chances are this answer too is, "no." In most situations faith does not come instantaneously, but must develop over time. Faith grows out of evidence from the past.

PRAYER

Gracious God, we thank you for the lives of the faithful whom you have portrayed in Scripture to serve as examples. May we be encouraged by these faithful examples to grow in our own faith toward Christian maturity. May we serve in turn as faithful examples to others. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Faith is the victory!

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

In our lesson next week we will consider how we can stay faithful during those times when God disciplines us. "Ouch!" Study Background Scripture: Hebrews 12.

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