

“Faith and Righteousness”

Devotional Reading: Romans 5:12-21 **Background Scriptures:** Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11:1–4a, 7a, 8, 17–18, 20–23, 32, 39–40 (NIV)

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ^{4a} By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.

.....
^{7a} By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

.....
¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”

.....
²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. ²³ By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.

.....
³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,

.....
³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To define faith and to give examples of some very faithful people.
- **Biblical Principle:** To believe and trust God by faith when evidence is unseen.
- **Daily Application:** To walk by faith and to believe the promises of God.

INTRODUCTION

Listening to the Trustworthy Voice

There is a particular game where someone is blindfolded and assigned specific tasks to accomplish; another person would be designated as a guide but was allowed only to give (speak) instructions to the one who was blindfolded. The job of other people in the room was to cause distractions by shouting, making noise, giving wrong instructions, etc. The blindfolded person had to have faith in the guide and listen to only the guide.

God functions much like the guide in that game, and He has proven himself trustworthy. We may desire to do what our limited vision tells us is edifying and appropriate. But if we are listening to our guide and trusting His voice above all else, we may discover otherwise.

LESSON CONTEXT

When reading a text, it’s always a good idea to know the purpose for which it was written. The natural approach is to look for a clear purpose statement, such as in Luke 1:3–4 and John 20:30–31. The book of Hebrews, however, has no such statement. So the book’s purpose must be inferred from its contents. The extended comparisons and contrasts of Jesus with Old Testament personalities, the Levitical priesthood, angels, etc., signify the purpose being to encourage wavering and persecuted Christians of Jewish background to stand firm in Christ and not retreat into Judaism. Beyond this certain conclusion, there is no consensus regarding the authorship and date of Hebrews. However, the book of Hebrews also

discusses the worship within the temple as though such a structure were still in existence, so a date prior to the temple's destruction in A.D. 70 is likely.

Questions of authorship, date, and provenance aside, what is clear from the contents is that the readers were in danger of giving up due to their suffering for having faith in Christ (Hebrews 10:32–39). The current study begins immediately after that danger is addressed.

Faith Explained: Hebrews 11:1–4a

Ancient Greek words translated as *faith*, *faithful*, and *faithfulness* occur some 316 times in ancient New Testament manuscripts. The 37 occurrences of these words in the book of Hebrews comprise almost 12 percent of the 316. Clearly, the subject of faith is vital to the author.

However, Hebrews 11:1 is not a definition of faith but a description of what faith does and how it works. True Bible faith is not blind optimism or a manufactured “hope-so” feeling. Neither is it an intellectual assent to a doctrine. *True Bible faith is confident obedience to God's Word in spite of circumstances and consequences.* <-Read that last sentence again and let it soak into your mind and heart.

This faith operates quite simply. God speaks and we hear His Word. We trust His Word and act on it no matter what the circumstances are or what the consequences may be. The circumstances may be impossible, and the consequences frightening and unknown; but we obey God's Word just the same and believe Him to do what is right and what is best.

The unsaved world does not understand true Bible faith, perhaps because it sees so little faith in action in the church today. The cynical editor H.L. Mencken defined faith as “illogical belief in the occurrence of the impossible.” The world fails to realize that faith is only as good as its object, and the object of our faith is *God*. Faith is not some “feeling” that we manufacture. It is our total response to what God has revealed in His Word.

The writer of Hebrews uses the word *confidence*, and emphasizes faith as the answer to the eternal rewards God has promised as he sets the stage for the numerous illustrations of this fact.

1. What did the author of the book of Hebrews have to say about faith? (Hebrews 11:1)

What Do You Think?

How will you live in faith that God will be present with you in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How does the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1 assist you in facing daily circumstances?

The *ancients* are the Old Testament faithful, and the word *this* refers to their faith as just defined in the Hebrews 11:1. God is the one who *commended* them for their faith (the same word is translated “spoke well of” in Hebrews 11:4b, not in our printed text). With this observation, the writer both begins and ends (see 11:39) what has come to be called the “Hall of Faith.”

The writer of Hebrews makes it clear that faith is a very practical thing (Heb. 11:3), in spite of what unbelievers say. Faith enables us to understand what God does. Faith enables us to see what others cannot see (note Heb. 11:7, 13, 27). As a result, faith enables us to do what others cannot do! People laughed at these great men and women when they stepped out by faith, but God was with them and enabled them to succeed to His glory. Dr. J. Oswald Sanders put it perfectly: “Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.”

2. Who are the ancients? (Hebrews 11:2-3)

The author begins his cavalcade (procession) of the faithful by focusing upon the first man in the biblical record to demonstrate faith. The account of Abel is found in Genesis 4.

Able's faith was demonstrated in that he *brought God a better offering than Cain*. In what way was his sacrifice better? Was it because his was animal and Cain's vegetable? Or his a *firstborn* and Cain's not the first fruit? Genesis 4:1-15 helps us understand our text. It was not the offering that made one acceptable and the other unacceptable, since God accepted both grain and animal offerings according to their purposes. But it was the character of the person that made one offering acceptable and the other not. Both Hebrews and Genesis stress that point. In Hebrews it is witness that Abel offered “by faith;” obviously Cain did not. Genesis records that even before the rejection of his offering Cain's heart was not

right with God (Gen. 4:7). God's acceptance of Able's offering was a witness that he was righteous (Matthew 23:35). "he still speaks, even though he is dead" (not in today's text) suggest an illusion to Abel's blood speaking from the ground (Genesis 4:10) in that Able's testimony of faith given so long ago still speaks to us today as the first martyr of the faith.

3. Why was Abel included in Hebrew's Hall of Faith? (Hebrews 11:4a)

Faith Lived Out: Hebrews 11:7a, 8, 17-18, 20-23, 32

Noah's account is found in Genesis 6-9. Building the *ark* was no small exercise in faith! The expression of *things not yet seen* is connected with the beginning of Hebrews 11:1. Thus, Noah's *faith* was based on the word of God concerning the flood, which Noah was not yet able to see.

Noah's faith involved the whole person: his *mind* was warned of God; his *heart* was moved with fear; and his *will* acted on what God told him. Since nobody at that time had ever seen a flood (or even a rainstorm), Noah's actions must have generated a great deal of interest and ridicule as well. Noah's faith influenced his whole family, and they were saved. It also condemned the whole world, for his faith revealed their unbelief.

4. How did Noah demonstrate faith in something not yet seen? (Hebrews 11:7a)

The call of *Abraham* is found in Genesis 12:1-3, with the man's walk of faith recorded from 12:4 through 25:11 (compare Acts 7:1-7). Abraham had to trust the unseen, invisible God rather than the visible, fictitious gods (idols) of his culture. And he did so as he departed for an unknown land several hundred miles distant. Considering that Abraham was the man who "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6), it is certainly fitting that he is included on this list.

But that doesn't mean Abraham never sinned (see Genesis 16:3-4; 12:12-13; 20:2). As we consider the faith-walk of several members of the Hall of Faith, we will remind ourselves that they were not without flaws, or never tested, which brings us to verses 17-18 of today's lesson.

The point of these two verses (17-18) is that Abraham, after he had finally received the son of God's promise, "when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice" (detailed in Genesis 22). This was his "one and only son" which must be understood as unique or one-of-a-kind son. Abraham had other sons, but Isaac was the miraculous son through whom God would fulfill His promises (see Abraham's other unique descendant, John 3:16).

By this time in life Abraham's faith was so strong that he could believe that God would raise Isaac "from the dead though he had never seen such a miracle. He totally trusted God to do all things well (see Heb. 11:19, not in today's text).

5. Why is it fitting that Abraham is included in the Hall of Faith? How did Abraham demonstrate faith in the unseen God? (Hebrews 11:8, 17-18)

The author briefly expresses the faith of other patriarchs. After *Isaac* was born in about 2067 B.C., he grew up to become the father of *Jacob and Esau*, twins born in about 2007 B.C. Isaac, like his father Abraham, was something of a mixed bag of character traits. Isaac obeyed God *by faith* (see Genesis 26:1-6), but Isaac also adopted his father's practice of deception (26:7). He was also guilty of the parental error of favoritism (25:28). God sometimes uses people in His service despite themselves.

When God's plan appeared in danger as a result of these situations, the author of Hebrews reminds us that God was still at work. Isaac blessed his sons, looking forward to how God used them in His plan (27:27-40). Some scholars believe that Jacob is mentioned before Esau because it was through the lineage of Jacob that the promise would be fulfilled in Christ.

6. How did faith in God prevail in Isaac's family despite sins of deceit and favoritism? (Hebrews 11:20)

Likewise, Jacob's blessing of both sons of Joseph involve faith, for also involved the carrying out of God's promise. The choice of these particular events from the lives of Isaac and Jacob is to serve as the one demonstration of this faith which surely demonstrates the intimacy between faith and God's will and Word. Yet, even more amazing is the accompanying statement that Jacob did this "as he leaned on the top of his staff." Evidently, Jacob's life of surrender and faith began the night he wrestled with the Lord at Peniel

(Genesis 32:24-32). God permanently put Jacob's thigh out of joint that night as reminder of their encounter. Jacob's staff was a daily reminder of God's promises, and his life of faith that was best symbolized by his staff.

Similarly, Joseph's faith is also united with the promise God made with the patriarchs. For though he spent most of his life in Egypt, Joseph *gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones* that they should be carried to the Promised Land. They did! (see Ex. 13:19 and Josh. 24:32). This must have been an encouragement to the young people because Joseph knew what he believed—that God would one day deliver His people from Egypt (Gen. 50:24-26).

7. How was faith in God demonstrated through Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons? (Hebrews 11:21-22)

What Do You Think?

How can you be a blessing and encourage a younger person this week?

Digging Deeper

What role does sharing our faith have in blessing others according to Galatians 3:9?

This of course is not the faith of Moses, but the faith which was exercised by his parents at birth (Exodus 2:1-10). How much his parents understood concerning the imminent completion of Israel's 400 years in Egyptian bondage (see Gen. 15:13) or the part Moses would play in Israel's deliverance is impossible to imagine. Yet, somehow, through faith they responded to God's leading.

By faith Moses made his break with the world and was willing to suffer with the people God (the same thing the author is anxious to see his readers do). Moses knew that the pleasure of sin lasts only for a season, and he reckoned the criticism of Christ greater than the treasures of Egypt (see Heb. 11:24-26, not in today's text). Moses did know of the coming of Christ (Deuteronomy 18:15) and was willing to be criticized on His behalf.

8. Why were Moses' parents included in Hebrews 11? (Hebrews 11:23)

What Do You Think?

How do you trust God even when you can't immediately see the results of His plans?

Digging Deeper

How do the examples in the Hall of Faith encourage you in that regard?

The author wants to go on, but time constraints him. So many more deserved recognitions in The Hall of Faith. Verses 33-38 (not in our lesson text) list mighty deeds of faith done by those of biblical history.

The story of *Gideon* is found in Judges 6-8. He served as a judge from 1192 B.C. to 1152 B.C. He's most notable for his 300-man force defeating the Midianite army. *Barak*—a contemporary of Deborah, who judged from 1239 B.C. to 1199 B.C.—raised an army to defeat the Canaanites, according to Judges 4. *Samson* served as judge from 1075 B.C. to 1055 B.C.; his opposition to the Philistines is found in Judges 13-16. The leadership of *Jephthah* against the Ammonites is recorded in Judges 11-12; his judgeship extended from 1086 B.C. to 1080 B.C.

The extensive record of *David* (reigned 1010-970 B.C.) runs from 1 Samuel 16 through 1 Kings 2. The ministry of *Samuel*—who is pivotal for being the last of the judges and the first of the prophets—is found in 1 Samuel 1-25. These individuals of faith were not faultless but endured because of faith!

9. How did the writer of Hebrews say about faith through the centuries? (Hebrews 11:32)

Promises Because of Faith: Hebrews 11:39-40

The writer repeats the thoughts of Hebrews 11:13 (not in the lesson text) but in a condensed form. The word translated *were all commended* is the same as that in Hebrews 11:2; it carries the idea of "having been witnessed" doing something through *faith*. Since the faith of those being considered looked ahead to

the arrival of Jesus, which did not come about in their lifetimes, *none of them received what had been promised* (contrast Matthew 13:16–17). But they had faith, nonetheless.

The *better* thing is the promise fulfilled in the earthly mission of Christ. The author here shows the superiority of the New Covenant. God save this better thing or fulfillment of the promise, for this age. In fact, without those of the New Covenant, even the mightiest champion of faith in the Old Testament could “not be “made perfect.” Both we and *they* are *made perfect* in His suffering (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8–9; 7:28).

10. What did God plan for us? (Hebrews 11:39-40)

What Do You Think?

What are some examples of knowledge and resources we have today that the heroes of the past could have never imagined?

Digging Deeper

How do you think God would like you to use these blessings?

CONCLUSION

The Faith of Imperfect People

The writer of Hebrews selected some very faithful people as examples, people who also had some significant imperfections. We are to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), and this should be easier for us than for the Old Testament luminaries (lights). They lived with only a promise and a hope, while we live with the cross and resurrection as accomplished facts (1 Peter 1:12).

But although we are privileged to see much more of God’s plan fulfilled, some promises remain to be fulfilled—a resurrection body, new heavens, a new earth, etc. Many times we must make decisions without being able to see their results. A faith-based decision is based on believing the promises of God and determining to do what God has called you to do, regardless of how it might look in your eyes or the eyes of others. May the Holy Spirit empower you to do so!

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank You for these faithful servants of Yours whose deeds inspire us in our faith. May we prove to be at least as faithful as they were. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Faith overrides imperfections!