

Chapter 16 – Generations of faith now rewarded - Hebrews 11

Unbelief and rebellion is not the totality of Israel's history. It also has a history of individuals who had extraordinary faith and perseverance, enduring hope and uncompromising obedience. Having drawn warnings from their history of disobedience, the author now encourages his readers to emulate the faith of their nation's heroes. But that is not all. Again and again he points out that these people never inherited the promises in their lifetimes. It was not possible – until now.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 10 and look forward to studying chapter 11.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 11 by reading through and noting any questions or surprises. These are the things that strike me in chapter 11.

- V1 How can we be sure of what we hope for?
- V4 What does Abel still speak of?
- V5 How did Enoch please God?
- V6 How does God reward those who seek Him?
- V10 Why the reference to foundations?
- V13,39 What is the point of believing for things you never see?

We will try to address these issues as we examine the detail.

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Gen 1-2 (Creation v3), Gen 4:3-5 (Abel v4), Gen 5:21-24 (Enoch v5), Gen 6:13-22 (Noah v7), Gen 12-21 (Abraham v8-19), Gen 27:26-40 (Isaac v20), Gen 48:1-20 (Jacob v21), Gen 50:24f (Joseph v22), Ex 1-2, 10-14 (Moses v23-29), Josh 6:20 (Joshua v30), Josh 2:9,6:23 (Rahab v31).

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was:¹ “Exhortation to imitate the faith of past and present saints.”

Chapter 11 presents a catalogue of saints from Israel's history who stand as examples of faith. When, earlier in chapter 6, the author exhorted his readers to imitate those who by faith and patience inherited what was promised, these were the kind of people he had in mind. When, in the last verse of chapter 10 he said “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved”, these faithful saints are the company he had in mind as examples for us.

My fine-brush structure is:

- V1-3 Faith makes the invisible become reality.
- V4-7 Faith before Abraham.
- V8-12 Abraham's faith.

¹ See chapter 4

V13-16 Faith for the heavenly hope.

V17-22 The faith of Israel's fathers.

V23-29 Moses' faith

V30-40 The faith of many who did not receive the promise in this life.

Argument

In this chapter the author shows that Israel has a history of faithful individuals with whom God has been pleased, yet none received the promised inheritance in their lifetimes. Their hope was beyond the grave and they stood firm in their faith despite great difficulties. The fulfilment of their promises had to wait until Christ came. In Him, they as well as we are made perfect.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 11:

The Old Testament has many examples of men and women who stood firm in their faith in God's promises despite great difficulties. Though at the time they did not inherit what was promised, now in Christ their promises have been fulfilled.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 11.

Heb 11:1-3

⁽¹⁾ Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of 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.

The argument

Throughout the letter the author has been exhorting his readers to stand firm in faith. Whereas in Paul's letters, faith is normally directed back to Christ's death – faith in the redeeming work of Christ – in this letter the author constantly directs faith forward to the promises of inheritance. He has laboured to establish the foundation of faith in Christ's completed and all sufficient work. These are the basic truths from which he wants his readers to move on to maturity (6:1). In Hebrews, faith is directed towards the future.² True faith is demonstrated by rejoicing in the sure expectation of our future reality. Faith allows us to rejoice now in the things we do not yet possess. But it is not just the inner assurance of faith that the author wants to encourage, it is the outward expressions of that faith which make those unseen things visible in our lives.³ Our ancestors in the faith demonstrated such faith and received God's commendation. We are to follow their example so that we might receive the full reality of all that they hoped for.

Faith is substance; it is evidence; it is certainty. Faith is the tangible, solid, present reality of something as yet unseen. Faith says "I have this promise from God, and God is absolutely faithful and true. That is more sure to me than having it in my hands."

² I recommend John Piper's *Future Grace* as an excellent theological and practical exploration of living in the light of our future hope.

³ Heb 11:1 may be better translated in an objective sense, as in the NKJV: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." This statement is not intended to be a definition of faith but a description of faith.

Faith makes real those things that do not yet exist. The supreme example and encouragement for us in this regard is creation itself. By faith we believe in creation as the result of God's spoken word. Creation is the foundation of all our faith, giving it rationality. Since God made all that is now seen out of nothing, He is well able to fulfil His promises to us, no matter how impossible it may seem, no matter how invisible the present evidence. Faith is often a matter of believing God despite the evidence, which is why Paul says, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2Co 4:18). Creation is testimony to the power of God upon which the promises depend.

It was such faith - faith that believes and trusts God's word - for which the ancients were commended. Will God commend us for believing Him?

Heb 11:4-7

⁽⁴⁾ By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. ⁽⁵⁾ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁽⁶⁾ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. ⁽⁷⁾ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The argument

Abel offered a lamb whereas Cain offered grain and Abel brought the firstfruits whereas Cain simply brought fruits. Beyond this Genesis does not say why Abel's offering was more acceptable, but the writer to the Hebrews attributes it to faith. The inference is that Cain was trying to obtain God's favour by bringing the fruit of his labour, whereas Abel was acknowledging the depth of his dependence upon God's gracious mercy as symbolised in the death of the lamb. The animal sacrifice looks forward to Christ's future sacrifice – perhaps God intended to establish from the beginning that none can worship Him apart from the shed blood of Christ.

Although Cain's offering was rejected by God, the Lord still loved him and sought to win him. He warned Cain not to sin in his anger at having his offering rejected but Cain nevertheless went ahead and killed his brother. Here we see a picture of God rejecting people's attempts at self-justification whilst He continues to reach out to them in love.

The writer says that Abel "still speaks..." Abel is the first person of whom we are told their faith was counted as righteousness. Jesus also refers to him as righteous "...from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah..."⁴ Although we tend to think of Abraham as the father of "righteousness by faith" it all started with Abel. Enoch followed his example and Noah "became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."

...without faith it is impossible to please God...

All of scripture tells us that God looks for faith in His people. He is not looking for people who have got correct doctrine or nice facilities or excellent worship bands. Great training programs, big budgets and international ministries do not impress him. He does not count bottoms on seats or hands in the air or knees bent in prayer. God looks for people of faith – people who believe what He says and act on it. This is the author's message. He is careful that the foundations of faith are

⁴ "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." (Mt 23:35)

secure, but he wants us to move on from there to be those who act out our faith in the future promises of God. To please God we must believe He rewards those who earnestly seek Him, those who have got hold of the promises and who through faith and patience press on through every delay and difficulty and discouragement to possess what He has promised. The base-line promise we have is the promise to Abraham for blessing and to be a blessing and to be fruitful. Beyond that, there are numerous other promises that God has given. Many of these are given to all believers but the Holy Spirit may have impressed some promises on your heart with such force that you know God is speaking specifically to you. Others promises may have been brought to you through prophetic words which you have shared and tested over time to the point where you feel you can be confident they are from God. Whatever the case, God is not simply looking for *good* Christians but *believing* Christians; whose lives *show* they are trusting the invisible God.

Noah ... became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith

Whereas Abel's faith was expressed in worship and Enoch's in fellowship, Noah's was expressed in the most practical of ways: he built a huge boat to save his family from the promised destruction. His daily occupation before his neighbours demonstrated his faith in the unseen God. And so he too became "heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."

We should be careful not to misunderstand "righteousness that comes by faith". This is not faith *for* righteousness; this faith is not saying "I believe I am righteous" but "I believe what God has said to me." It is believing what God has said which moves the Only Righteous One to overlook our ragged sinfulness and say "Your trust in My word makes us friends and companions."

The point made by the writer to the Hebrews that God accounted Abel, Enoch and Noah's faith as righteousness is, if you stop to consider it, a truly remarkable claim. God alone is righteous; it is his unique essence, the very definition of who He is. For God to turn to any man and say, "In my sight you are righteous" is to say, "You share in my unique essence". It is not just granting a person permission to approach God, it is saying "You are like Me, therefore we can have fellowship together". When we understand this we can begin to glimpse the extraordinary importance of believing God's promises. When we say, "God you have spoken, therefore I believe you" then we are sharing in God's nature. As Peter says, "He has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Believing God's promises is how we share in God's nature.

This letter would not have been written if simply believing the basic Christian truths were all God wanted of us. The appeal is to go on in faith to full maturity, inheriting the promises God has given to His people so that the world may know that Jesus has indeed come in the flesh and risen from the dead and is making the kingdom of this world His own glorious Kingdom.

Heb 11:8-12

⁽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. ⁽⁹⁾ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ⁽¹⁰⁾ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ⁽¹¹⁾ By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ⁽¹²⁾ And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

The argument

... by faith Abraham ...was enabled to become a father

Although elsewhere Abraham is held up as our example of righteousness by faith, that is not the point being made here. Abraham is presented as an example of faith producing fruitfulness.⁵ Outwardly, his life seemed fruitless and aimless, living in tents, moving from place to place, strangers in a strange land. But in fact his heart was set on God's promises for a land, a secure home and a host of descendants. By faith he became fruitful.

Jesus has given us a promise for fruitfulness: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit--fruit that will last--and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." (John 15:16) By faith we can inherit this promise. Jesus gave it to us; Abraham is our example; we must not shrink back in unbelief.

Abraham's hope was for a city with foundations, not to wander from place to place in a tent.⁶ He was motivated in his obedience by the promises God had given for prosperity in a new land. God's goal for each of us is to live securely in prosperity, but that promise may be temporarily frustrated by the evils of this world. Abraham lived in a city with foundations in Ur before he followed God's call. How strange it must have seemed for a man looking for prosperity and security to leave those very things behind and wander the land in a tent. The paradox of faith is that sometimes we demonstrate our faith in a secure future by living in tents today. The victory of Christ is sometimes demonstrated in the lives of severely afflicted disciples (see 2 Cor 4:6-11).

When God calls us, faith requires that we respond with acts of obedience, whether or not we know the destination or purpose of the call. And when we arrive at the place God has called us to, we should live as pilgrims on a journey, not settling down to the extent that we are unwilling to move on at God's instruction. Whether the place is a physical location or a way of doing things, we must remain mobile and responsive to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Heb 11:13-16

⁽¹³⁾ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ⁽¹⁴⁾ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

⁽¹⁵⁾ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

The argument

Here the author presses home the point that these patriarchs kept living by faith in God's promises to their death, even though they never saw the fullness of what was promised. During their entire life of faith, the Canaanites inhabited cities in the land whilst the patriarchs lived in tents. What an example of enduring faith! Unlike the Israelites in the desert, they never looked back to the security they had left behind. Their hope was firmly set in God's promises for their future – a future with God in heaven.

⁵ Translators vary in how they interpret the reference to Sarah in v11, but these variations do not affect the argument.

⁶ The Greek of v9 says that Abraham lived with Isaac and Jacob. It seems most unlikely that Jacob was born before Abraham's death, but in the same way that Levi was in the loins of Abraham when he met Melchizedek (7:10), so Jacob and his descendants were in the loins of Abraham when he dwelt in tents. It was to be more than 400 years before Abraham's descendants built cities in the promised land.

Our destiny is God Himself, not any of the gifts or ministries he may give us. Abraham knew that arriving in the land and having descendants was not the true fulfilment of the promises he had received. The prophets knew that when Joshua, and later David, had given the people rest from their enemies, there was still a promise of rest to be fulfilled in God. God Himself is our ultimate inheritance and our security in God is of such comfort that we do not need to hedge ourselves about with worldly security.

Even though we may enjoy blessings in this life, and that should be our expectation as heirs of Abraham's promise, all such blessings should be enjoyed as pointing forward to the greater blessings to come when our life in this present age is over and we see Christ in all His glory.

"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ," (Php 3:20)

"Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." (1Pe 1:17)

"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." (1Pe 2:11)

Heb 11:17-22

⁽¹⁷⁾ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received 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." ⁽¹⁹⁾ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. ⁽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 worshipped 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 about his bones.

The argument

Abraham's greatest test was when God told him to sacrifice Isaac. His faith in both the promise and the power of God enabled him to obey, despite the apparent contradiction between the command and the promise. Following this, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph demonstrated their faith in God's promises by speaking to their offspring of the Promised Land and about becoming a multitude of God's people. Yet each did so in the absence of physical evidence.

Faith is easy when things are going well and we are enjoying the fruit of the promises, but when all avenues for progress seem blocked and every hope is dashed and the promise seems as far away as it ever did, then is the time for steadfast faith. Such are the examples we have in the patriarchs.

By faith we can bless. We should not take blessing lightly. The faith that pleases God does not just say nice words over someone to "bless" them. God's promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to those that followed. An important part of this was through prayers of blessing. We should treat a blessing with the same faith and purpose as a prayer for healing. It is a serious matter to obtain by faith a future blessing from God Almighty for another person. Let us make serious faith-filled blessing part of our ministry.

Heb 11:23-29

⁽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. ⁽²⁴⁾ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ⁽²⁵⁾ He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ⁽²⁶⁾ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his

reward. ⁽²⁷⁾ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. ⁽²⁸⁾ By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. ⁽²⁹⁾ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

The argument

Faith preserved and propelled Moses' life. He chose to identify with God's downtrodden people rather than with his privileged upbringing because he had his heart set on God's eternal reward. He withstood all Pharaoh's threats because he had met with God. Both Moses and the people of Israel showed their faith by keeping the Passover and crossing the Red Sea.

Although a number of aspects of faith are illustrated in this brief account of Moses, the author does not dwell on them. His purpose is not to discover great truths about faith, but to show that faith is at the heart of Jewish history and Christian heritage.

Heb 11:30-40

⁽³⁰⁾ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. ⁽³¹⁾ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. ⁽³²⁾ And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ⁽³³⁾ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ⁽³⁴⁾ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ⁽³⁵⁾ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ⁽³⁶⁾ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ⁽³⁷⁾ They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated— ⁽³⁸⁾ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ⁽³⁹⁾ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

The argument

The author continues his recollection of the heroes of faith and their exploits and sufferings by simply listing some of their names and the kinds of situations they encountered with faith.⁷ Some achieved great things and some suffered great hardship and severe testing, even to death. Some escaped the sword (v34) whilst others died by the sword (v37). This is not a triumphalistic list proclaiming success for all who have strong faith. The point of this list is made in v39: "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised." This is a catalogue of people who did not throw away their confidence in God's promises. They did not shrink back in the day of testing. This is the point the author wishes to illustrate. He concludes with a brief explanation for why "none of them received what had been promised". It was not due to their lack of faith but because those promises depended upon Christ, who had not yet come. But now, with us, they are "made perfect."

⁷ Many of the incidents referred to are recorded in the Old Testament, others are found in the records of the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes in 1 and 2 Maccabees. Isaiah was believed to have been sawn in two.

...the prostitute Rahab

It is remarkable that Rahab should be given a place of prominence in Israel's history, since she was a foreign, immoral woman. Yet, in God's great plan, her sheltering the spies and the faith that showed in God was counted to her as righteousness (James 2:25). She lived with God's people, gave up prostitution, married Salmon and she became an ancestor of Christ! (Matt 1:5). Such is the extent of God's grace towards those who believe and trust in Him.

Conclusion

This chapter follows the exhortation of the previous chapter, to stand firm in confidence in God's promises, with a catalogue of those who did just that. Rule-keepers and those who can see only the visible world about them do not impress God. Faith and trust are the qualities which honour and please Him. There are many heroes of faith stretching from the distant past right through to today who stand as examples for us to follow. Such are those the author had in mind when earlier he wrote, "We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (Heb 6:11-12)

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 11

- V1-3 What gospel truths give you most hope and assurance?
Are there any promises you feel God has given you particular faith for?
Are there any promises you are particularly trying to grow in faith for?
Are there any promises you have particular difficulties with?
- V4-7 Do you sometimes feel that your efforts are never enough? That other people always overshadow you? That you have nothing worthwhile to offer? How does the letter to the Hebrews help you to overcome this?
Think through the ways in which this passage relates to your life. What expressions of faith are evident in your life?
In what ways can you increase the element of faith in your life?
- V8-12 In what ways does Abraham's life serve as a model for us?
How has your life been shaped by God's promises?
What is your "promised land" which you long to inherit?
What ways can you "camp" in your promised land before you inherit it fully?
- V13-16 What answer can you give to those who say you are living for a pipe-dream, that you will never see what you hope for?
- V17-22 Have you ever had to lay down the very things you felt were the key or path to your future? How did you deal with this?
In what ways can you show your faith in God's promises for the future, at a personal level, at a church level and at a community level?
- V23-29 What personal, lifestyle or professional choices have you made because of your faith? Why did you make those choices? Are there choices you regret making or not making?
- V30-40 Who are your heroes of faith from the OT, NT and church history?
Do you have any living heroes of faith that you would love to emulate?
What qualities of faith would you most like to grow in?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?