

## Hebrews Study Session 17 - Chapter 11

Chapter 11 is often called the Hall of Faith. Chapter 10 dealt with the importance of faith and faithful living for Christians. The end of chapter 10 led straight into this part of the sermon where the author calls believers to faithful endurance by use of volumes upon volumes of testimony from the lives of ancient saints. Believers are challenged to live lives of faith according to the pattern seen in those who, by faith, were faithful to God in their earthly pilgrimages. We can break this chapter into 5 different sections that compare to a long musical arrangement. 1) overture (1-3), 2) the first movement (4-12), 3) interlude (13-16), 4) the second movement (17-31), & 5) crescendo and finale (32-40).

As we start this lesson, we need to keep in mind that condition of the original audience. They were beaten down in the world, persecuted and fearful for their lives and future. They had already experienced trouble and now it seemed that they would face more than before. It was tempting to leave Christian faith behind for the familiar and safe Judaism. This chapter was meant to encourage those believers to endure in Christ.

Before we get started there is a phrase that will be repeated constantly in this chapter. "By faith". This repetition focuses the attention on the centrality of the life of faith for the people of God. They are not to live according to "sight" (circumstances, emotions, human calculations) but rather by a faith whose object is God Himself.

### 1. The Overture

#### **[Read Hebrews 11:1-3]**

The statements of faith in v.1 are not really a definition of faith but rather give us some significant and necessary features of what genuine faith. The author then moves to show how faith works out in practice.

"Assurance" - is a noun (a thing), it means substance, confidence, firmness, guarantee, or proof. Faith is a living thing, not just a virtue held in our minds. It is a way of life and it enables those who have genuine faith to know certain realities exist even though we have no material evidence. Apart from faith, we would have no certainty of these things existing but through faith we confidently know they do exist.

Q: Based on our study of Hebrews thus far, what would think some of the things "hoped for" would include? (*forgiveness of sins, solid relationship with God, heaven, etc.*)

"Conviction" - this word isn't used for a static doctrine or dogma. Rather it implies a dynamic and active state of teachability. This ability to see beyond rote dogma allows the believer to stretch out his hand and lay hold of the invisible realities on which our faith is fixed - these are things which believers already have in Christ. (That was chapter 10). This "conviction" also has the connotation of "cross-examining" a witness to discern the truth. We use faith in order to come to know the actual truth of a situation. Without faith people accept what they see and are experiencing as truth, which is living by sight.

There are two types of unseen realities: 1) those which belong to the spiritual realm & 2) those which belong to the future. Neither of these can we see clearly without faith. However, life lived boldly in these unseen realities is commended by God.

Q: According to the author, what prepared the material worlds? (*v.3 - the Word of God*)

**[Read Genesis 1:1]**

**[Read John 1:1-3]**

Notice how the Old Testament gives us the basics of creation. We know that God created the world from nothing. Then look at how the revelation is expanded and clarified in the New Testament. It was actually Christ who was the agent of creation. When we look through this chapter of Hebrews, like in a few other places we have already seen, we are going to be given some insight and fresh revelation from God as to the events in the Old Testament.

Q: Why do you think the author begins with this illustration of the creation? (*It is one of the ultimate acts of faith to believe that what is in existence came into being from a being outside normal space/time. The visible universe is not sufficient to account for itself. Also, the author is building a chronological foundation for the rest of his discussion on faith. It has to begin somewhere and the beginning of creation is the perfect place to start as it draws attention to the God who is the object of our faith. It is a common place for everyone in the discussion (Jews & Christians) to begin as they all agree that God created the material universe. It gets people in agreement with the speaker off the bat.*)

## 2. The first movement

As we read through these examples of the most ancient people of faith, keep in mind that the emphasis is on both the act accomplished and the right spiritual standing of the person demonstrating faith.

**[Read Hebrews 11:4-12]**

From here until almost the end of the chapter, each and every one of these illustrations is a narrative from the Old Testament. They each represent a story that involved a person using faith to see God accomplish something. We are not going to spend time on each and every story as each one is a sermon and yet it is important that the author of Hebrews is painting a huge portrait of faith that will end up spanning the entire Old Testament history and show it as the story of faith.

Q: Why was Abel's offering better than Cain's? (*v.4 - Abel offered it by faith*)

Q: What good did Abel's faith do him? (*v. 4 - he obtained the testimony of being righteous before God*)

This one is an exceptional case concerning most of the examples given in this chapter in that Abel showed faith yet still died.

Q: Why do you think that the author included this account in this chapter? *(Though Abel was dead, his life of faith still spoke. Faith gave him a living voice though he was dead.)*

This is the story of all believers who live by faith. Their voice remains living even after they die because it was built upon God who is eternal and those who He commends remain living after this life.

Q: Why was Enoch taken up to heaven and not allowed to die physically? *(v.5 - He was pleasing to God)*

Q: Enoch's life of faith was pleasing to God. What is essential in order to please God? *(v.6 - faith. Important note about chapter 11. When you see a verse that does not begin with "By faith" it should be linked to the verse before it. That's where you can draw out the more precise meaning.)*

Q: What are the two requirements of faith that pleases God? *(v.6 - those who come to God must know that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him)*

Those who believe He exists and rewards those who seek Him will live confidently in faith and not shrink back when confronted by problems and hardships in this world.

Q: Why do you think that faith is essential to pleasing God? *(God is a spirit and thus cannot be known apart from faith.)*

Noah (mentioned in 7) is the first person in the Bible to be called "righteous". This is because he took God at His Word and acted upon it. Notice that in each case given, a person heard from God and then acted upon what he/she heard.

Q: What is the paradox given in v.7 about Noah's righteous acts? *(They saved him and his family but condemned the rest of the world because his faithful actions led to the flood.)*

In v.8 the author begin a lengthy section on Abraham, who gets more time than any of the other ancients. "when he was called" - is a present participle that indicates prompt obedience. Another way to put it could be "he obeyed the call while it was still ringing in his ears". Abraham acted without reference to what he saw or knew.

Q: Did Abraham go to Canaan to possess it? *(no)*

Q: Why did Abraham move to Canaan? *(to live out faith in God - to live obediently to the call of God. Isn't that interesting. We move to some place for physical advantage of some sort. We go to possess something we hope will bring us "more" of what this world has to offer. Yet, Abraham moved solely on the basis of obeying God. He was giving up his home with his*

*kinsmen.)*

Q: Why was Abraham content to live in tents and not a city? (*v.10 - he was looking for a city whose architect and builder was God. What is interesting is that after Abraham's full life, he never owned any more of the Promised Land than the plot he purchased for his wife Sarah. Also, v.9 is the only place in the Bible where Canaan is called the "land of promise" or the "promised land".*)

There is a story of Abraham that goes with the section that isn't mentioned in Hebrews but shows again the faith of Abraham. When it was time to find a wife for his son Isaac, he did not personally go back to Mesopotamia to find himself a wife for his son. Also, he didn't send his son to find himself a wife. He sent a servant with strict instructions to find a wife for Isaac. This is revealing because he didn't want his son to go back to the established family residence and get comfortable there and decide to stay in that area. Abraham's father took the first steps from Ur but got comfortable in Haran and didn't make it all the way to Canaan. Abraham made the rest of the trip but wanted to make sure it didn't prove to be a temptation to himself or Isaac. Faith realizes that there are forces in this world that pull at us to move in an opposite direction than what God wants for us. Faith can look past the allure to realize that all that glitters is not gold.

This chapter only has one real translation difficulty and it is found in v.11. "Ability to conceive" is a convenient translation that glosses over the real issue. Literally it reads "power of depositing semen". Of course, this is something only a male can do. But the best resolution of this, in keeping with the flow of the chapter, reads "*By faith, he (Abraham), together with Sarah herself, received the power for laying down of seed....*" (It moves Sarah from the subject of the sentence to the object who receives the seed instead of the one who lays it down. In the Greek, the nominative case and dative cases look similar but also sound similar.)

When Sarah first heard she was going to get pregnant, she laughed. Hardly a sign of faith in God. However, she must have been won over by Abraham's faith in time so that she was open to what God was going to do for them. Our faith, needs to be contagious faith - spreading to those who may not actually believe God the first time they hear His voice. By the end of v.11 - we see that Sarah possessed the faith that led to Isaac's birth as well as her husband.

Q: Has there ever been a time when you were skeptical of a message from God but another person's faith inspired you to act upon it?

Q: How about the reverse? Have you ever been the one who had to convince someone that God was speaking and that despite what they felt, they needed to act on God's Word?

It is important to know that real faith challenges us to take our eyes off the obvious and focus on the God who is always faithful to His Word. The obvious was that Sarah could not conceive a child but when their eyes focused on God, instead of themselves, she got pregnant and the child was born. In the end the words of v.12 are a Hebrews expression meaning that God's blessing was beyond human calculation.

### 3. Interlude

The author is going to step outside his person-by-person account to make certain points. These points are things which apply to all Christians of all time.

#### **[Read Hebrews 11:13-16]**

The focus in these verse is Abraham and the patriarchs, not every single instance mentioned since v.3. Abraham and the patriarchs, because of their faith, saw themselves as strangers and exiles in this world. This shows the divide between the earthly desires (such as to dwell in safety in a home, dwell in comfort, etc.) and the longing for a heavenly home. Abraham and the patriarchs all died without ever receiving the land they were promised. Instead they died in a state of trust. They trusted that God was faithful. Thus their true object of desire was God and not the land or worldly blessing. The original readers could only see the present tribulations they faced. They couldn't see the unseen ultimate fulfilment of God's promises for them. The promises of God can be fulfilled even though their fulfilment lies in the future. This same faith is what allowed the patriarchs to see themselves as citizens of heaven and not of this earth. This is the same faith the author wanted for his listeners and the same faith we need to exercise today.

Q: What are some of the things you think we should do if we are to live as aliens and strangers in this world?

Like with Abraham, faith allows us to embrace the Word of God even though a certain promise may not be fulfilled until the future - such as heaven. Notice that if these patriarchs would have fallen away from the faith or lost hope, they had the opportunity to return to their homeland and their kin (v.15) but faith prevented this. At the end of v.16 it says that God prepared for them a city. This is in the aorist tense - it's already done and is still waiting for us today. God has completed the city for His faithful and it's waiting for them after this life.

### 4. The second movement

#### **[Read Hebrews 11:17-31]**

Now I want to pick up the pace quite a bit here. Most of the stories mentioned here are well-known and follow the same pattern as before. There are a couple that can help us out when we are looking at back at the original accounts in the Old Testament. The first one is right off the bat in v.17.

#### **[Read Genesis 22:1-14]**

Q: What was the dilemma for Abraham when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac? (*Isaac was the promised son through which the world would be blessed and his descendants would be reckoned but at if he sacrificed him, he'd be dead and could not have any descendants at all.*)

Q: What was Abraham's solution to the dilemma? (v.19 - *He considered God able to raise the*

dead)

Q: Did God tell Abraham that He could or would raise the dead? *(no)*

Q: What does this tell us about the nature of faith? *(It is living and dynamic - not static. It develops based upon the truths we know about God and the circumstances we face)*

All too often, we fail to use our minds to do this. We forget to allow God to be God and remember that He is not only always faithful but also can do all things. What Abraham did was a godly use of his imagination. He was using it to resolve a problem concerning the promise of God and the direct command of God and how they could both happen. He reasoned that God would have to bring Isaac back from the dead to fulfill the promise and have him fulfill the commandment given. However, as we see, God was greater than Abraham's imagination in that Abraham was wrong. Isaac didn't actually die, though as a type he did, and Abraham did receive his son back to himself. Yet, actually, God had a plan that could not be charted or foreseen by Abraham and yet to Abraham's credit, he followed God's command despite not knowing when he set out how it would be turn out. There are going to be situations in life where God will test our loyalty to Him. Will we be faithful to our doctrine about Him (which may or may not be true) or will we remain loyal to our God? *[Personal story of R-rated movies that led to salvation for one man]*

Q: In v. 23, why did Moses' parents hide him for three months? *(They saw that he was beautiful and so they didn't want him killed by Pharaoh's commandment to kill Hebrew baby boys. While the word "beautiful" is a normal word, the implication in this passage is that Moses' parents saw something unique about him. They saw the spiritual significance of their baby and hid him based on their faith about that uniqueness.)*

Q: Why did Moses endure the hardships of the Jews in Egypt rather than the passing pleasures of sin afforded to him by his royal upbringing? *(v. 26 - By faith he saw the reproaches of Christ greater than the riches of Egypt. The hardships of Christ are far better than anything this world has to offer.)*

V.26 is the only place in this chapter where the name of Christ is used and it's in regards to the reproaches of Christ or His tribulations. The author brings out that like Moses, Christ suffered in this world as they will as well to live out their faith. This is a constant reality in this world. We will always be strangers and aliens in this world and thus be treated with reproach by the world. Your faith in God will lead you to be misunderstood and mistreated.

**[Read II Timothy 3:12]**

**[Read John 16:33]**

## 5. Crescendo and Finale

It is in these final verses that the author makes his ultimate appeal for his original

audience to live by the same faith as has been demonstrated through the ages by those who sought after God.

**[Read Hebrews 11: 32-34]**

Here in the end, the author calls to remembrance six final Old Testament saints and then goes on to list several acts of faith that call to mind yet other saints. He's doing this to overwhelm any argument that anyone could have against living by faith. There are just too many Old Testament saints who exhibited faith in their lives to discount or ignore. It's the cornerstone of our life in Christ and cannot be discounted for convenience sake. The first six are not given in chronological order. Yet, all of these have a few things in common.

1) They all provide examples of valor in the face of overwhelming challenges.  
2) They (almost) all had serious character flaws yet God used them despite themselves. (*Samuel being the exception to that list. It wasn't that he was sinless, the Scriptures just don't list them.*)

A) Gideon - God used him to lead a pitifully small band of Jews against a huge number of oppressors and win with nothing other than torches and empty jars. Yet, Gideon was slow to take up arms and believe that God wanted to use him to deliver Israel.

B) Barak - God used him to deliver Israel as well but he wouldn't lead the army until he got assurance that Deborah, a prophetess, would be with him

C) Samson - God used him to begin to deliver Israel through a gift of incredible strength yet he had women problems and was enticed by Delilah.

D) Jephthah - God used him to win an amazing victory despite him making an ill-conceived and tragic vow and keeping it.

E) David - God used him extensively and was described as a man after God's own heart despite committing adultery and murder.

F) Samuel - He led Israel into the monarchy and is the only one on this list without any real personal issues associated with him.

G) At the end the author just mentions all the prophets - bringing to mind all the faithful messengers God sent to His people throughout their history to bring them back to Him. Most of them suffered death at the hands of their own countrymen for bringing the message to the people.

God used all these people despite themselves and their weakness because they acted on their faith in Him. There is no excuse to neglect God's instructions to us.

After this, the author goes from listing people to listing miracles that God did through the faith of unlisted saints. He knew, like you, the identity of these saints. (v. 33b-34)

Q: Who faced lions? (*Daniel*)

Q: Who quenched the power of fire (*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego*)

Q: Who was one person who escaped death by the sword? (*David*)

Q: Who was made strong? (*Samson & Elijah*)

This list elicits the memories of all the Old Testament stories in which faith was displayed and God got the glory. Yet, not every action of faith had what we'd call a positive outcome.

**[Read Hebrews 11:35-38]**

Notice how “others” would not accept their release from prison or the death sentence upon them so that they might obtain a better resurrection. In other words, these saints looked forward to being raised to the life of the age to come with God and not simply be restored to the life of this age again.

Q: Do these people listed in vv.35-38 lack the same faith as those in vv. 4-34? *(no)*

Q: If it is the same faith and the same God, why did these saints not get the “good” outcome? *(It wasn't God's will for them to get the “good” outcome. God had a purpose beyond what could be seen for these people. And from God's perspective, they did get the best outcome. They escaped the snares and dangers of this world and lived by faith with God.)*

Just a few people that would have been brought to mind here. According to tradition, Isaiah was sawn in two. Stoning was the most common form of Jewish execution so it covers a lot of people. Elijah and Elisha both wore animal skins for clothes.

One interesting point about the wording in v.38 is that the worth of God's servants was greater than that of everyone else in the world. The world was not worthy of these servants of God lived out their faith. Remember, he's speaking of the Old Testament saints here - not the New Testament believers.

**[Read Hebrews 11:39-40]**

The author concludes this symphony of faith by contrasting those who were commended by God with the new covenant community. Those who were now walking the path of hardship and persecution had a choice to make - either the path of faithfulness or faithlessness.

Q: Why didn't the Old Testament saints receive what God promised to them? *(v.39-40 - they couldn't receive it apart from the believers in the new covenant community)*

Q: What was it that the Old Testament saints lacked that those in the new covenant community possessed? *(The Messiah, the life of grace, fulness of salvation, etc.)*

This implies that there is a social dimension to salvation. It concerns the whole people of God and not just any few of them. As long as the believers in the Old Testament times were without those who are in Christ, it was impossible for them to experience the fulness of salvation. It was what Christ accomplished that opened up the way for confident access to God for both them and us. Only Christ bring saints from both covenants together before the throne of God. The final step of salvation, the glorification, the receiving of our inheritance, will be done with all the believers of all time together. God has set things up so that the promises to all of us are kept at the same time - when we are together. The author is bringing that idea of “perfecting”



up again to link it to Christ's work in chapters 5-10. With Christ on the scene, now we stand in unity with those saints and are perfected together. In another sense, this also goes a long way to explain to the original listeners that there is no going back. Why would anyone go back to Judaism since the foundations of it no longer exist. That covenant is no longer valid or in use. So now all there is to do is to move forward with Christ and in faith in Him since the other things have passed away. Those Old Testament saints are waiting for us to live by faith as they did so that we can all receive the rewards together. As always, this shows that we need each other. We need the testimony of the former saints and the encouragement of our local body to endure in faith.

There are a few pitfalls to avoid when it comes to dealing with faith in our modern culture.

1) "I am no hero" - We are called to step out from this world and act boldly at God's direction. No one is a hero. Most of the saints mentioned in Hebrews 11 had tragic flaws but God used them anyway.

2) "Misconception of faith"

a) Showing faith always means God will be good to me by way of blessing or ease

b) Faith is nothing more than our body of beliefs - wrong - it is active and living like God.

Faith is not just mental ascent or knowledge but rather a living relationship of trust in God.

c) Faith is just a blind leap into the unknown. It is a leap into the arms of a loving God we do know. We may not know the outcome but we do know the God calling us to action.

d) Faith is just a life of devotion and reflection. This can apply to any god. "He's a person of faith" - faith in what or who? But the genuine Biblical faith is always in Christ.

Q: If we were to attempt to define faith according to Hebrews 11, how would you define it or what would you use to describe it? (*many answers possible*)

a. confident action in accordance with what God says

b. action taken in response to unseen God and His promises

c. involves God working in miraculous ways in the lives of His people

d. faith works in a variety of situations

e. faith has a variety of outcomes

f. faith is rewarded by God

Possible definition: Faith is confidence that results in action carried out in a variety of situations by ordinary people in response to the unseen God and His promises with various outcomes but always with the ultimate outcome of God's commendation and reward.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?