

## Faith and Righteousness

Lesson for January 7, 2024

### Unit II: Learning about Faith

**Adult Topic:** Not Seeing, but Believing

**Background Scripture:** Hebrews 11

**Printed Text:** Hebrews 11:1-4a, 7a, 8, 17-18, 20-23, 32, 39-40

**Key verse:** “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV)

A young boy, on an errand for his mother, had just bought a dozen eggs. Walking out of the store, he tripped and dropped the sack. All the eggs broke, and the sidewalk was a mess. The boy tried not to cry. A few people gathered to see if he was OK and to tell him how sorry they were. In the midst of the works of pity, one man handed the boy a quarter. Then he turned to the group and said, “I care 25 cents worth. How much do the rest of you care?” James 2:16 points out that words don't mean much if we have the ability to do more.

*Stanley C. Brown*

In this week's lesson, “Hebrews 11 highlights the exemplary faith of many who demonstrate confidence in God's promises even in the absence of a tangible, seeable basis for doing so” (*Sunday School Commentary*, 2023-2024 Townsend Press, p. 171).

### Key Terms

1. **Faith** (verse 1) – Belief, trust, and loyalty to a person or thing. Christians find their security and hope in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and say "amen" to that unique relationship to God in the Holy Spirit through love and obedience as expressed in lives of discipleship and service.
2. **Gift** (verse 4) – A reward, offering or sacrifice. Simply a thing given.
3. **Hope(d)** (verse 1) – To trust in, wait for, look for, or desire something or someone; or to expect something beneficial in the future.
4. **Offered** (verse 4) – Made an offering; presented; dealt.
5. **Visible** (verse 1) – Brought to light; caused to appear; clear; manifest; seen.

## Lesson Background

When the various New Testament books were formally brought together into one collection shortly after A.D. 100, the titles were added for convenience. This epistle's title bears the traditional Greek title, "To the Hebrews," which was attested by at least in the second century A.D. Within the epistle itself, however, there is no identification of the recipients as either Hebrews (Jews), or Gentiles. Since the epistle is filled with references to Hebrew history and religion and does not address any particular Gentile or pagan practice, the traditional title has been maintained.

One of the great mysteries surrounding the Book of Hebrews concerns its authorship. For some unknown reason the author remains anonymous to us, though he was known to his original readers (13:23). Emphases on the Levitical priesthood and on sacrifices, as well as the absence of any reference to the Gentiles, support the conclusion that a community of Hebrews was the recipient of the epistle. Although these Hebrews were primarily converts to Christ, there were probably a number of unbelievers in their midst, who were attracted by the message of salvation, but who had not yet made a full commitment of faith in Christ. One thing is clear from the contents of the epistle: the community of Hebrews was facing the possibility of intensified persecution (10:32-39; 12:4).

The book of Hebrews contains exhortations, warnings and encouragement to Jewish Christians facing trials and was probably written not long before the Romans destroyed God's temple and its worship system in A.D. 70. The book gives reminders of how Jesus Christ superseded the Old Covenant priesthood and sacrifices.

In chapter 10, the author reminds the readers that God is faithful (verse 23) and that the just shall live by faith (verse 38). This is especially important as the time of Jesus Christ's return approaches (verses 25 and 37). This leads to a discussion of what faith is and what it looks like.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. Faith Explained (Hebrews 11:1-3)

**Now faith is the substance:** Just as our physical eyesight is the sense that gives us evidence of the material world, faith is the "sense" that gives us evidence of the invisible, spiritual world.

**Of things hoped for... of things not seen:** If you have the substance before you or if you can see it, there is no use for **faith**. Faith is needed for what we *can't* see and *can't* touch.

Faith does not contradict reason, though it may go beyond reason. One may objectively prove the Bible is the most unique book ever published and has impacted society more than any other book. But only faith can *prove* that the Bible is the *Word of God*. Therefore, this is a belief *beyond* reason but not in *contradiction* to reason or *against* reason.

**Faith is the substance... the evidence:** Faith is *not* a bare belief or intellectual understanding. It is a willingness to trust in, to rely on, and to cling to.

**For by it the elders:** The great examples of godliness all had different circumstances and personalities, but they all had one thing in common – faith.

**Obtained a good report:** These Jewish Christians were discouraged and thought of giving up on Jesus and a distinctive Christianity. They needed a **good testimony**, and so they needed these examples of faith to break them out of discouragement.

Faith includes certainty regarding truths that people have good reasons to believe and trust. The Holy Spirit uses the truth of the Bible to inspire faith within us. God reveals truths to us through the Bible and the world around us, and the Bible explains why the world around us is not as God created it originally and what God intends to do to make it right (see Genesis through Revelation). Faith includes believing in truths, facts, or realities that we do not see yet. Faith believes the promises of God, and faith inspires us to hope that we will see fulfilled in our lifetime the promises of God when Jesus Christ comes again.

When we put our faith in God and choose to do the right and avoid the wrong, especially under the threat of persecution or martyrdom, we receive the approval of God and the approval of godly and knowledgeable people. When we choose to live by faith, as Abraham and Jesus lived, we do what is right and receive God’s commendation.

**By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word:** This happened when God simply commanded, “*Let there be light*” (Genesis 1:3). As the Psalmist explained: *By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth... For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.*” (Psalm 33:6, 33:9)

**By faith we understand:** We did not see this act of creation; we only know of it by faith. We also know this by *reason*, because we know the world was created and created by an intelligent Designer. Again, this is faith going *beyond* but not in *contradiction* to reason. This text *does not* say that God created the world *with* or *by* faith. Since God sees and knows all things, “faith” in a human sense does not apply to Him. Since we understand faith as *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*, we know that God sees everything and does not “hope” for anything.

**So that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible:** Most scientists at the time the Book of Hebrews was written believed the universe was created out of existing matter, not out of nothing. They believed the world was made out of things which are visible. But the Bible corrects this misunderstanding, clearly saying that the world was not made of things which are visible.

Most of the rest of the chapter is devoted to giving examples from Scripture to clarify this particular definition of faith. In each case, the same basic pattern emerges. These figures knew enough about God to trust Him, and so they obeyed, even when they were faced with doubts or challenges. In some cases, this meant trusting that God’s promises were ultimately meant to be fulfilled in eternity, not necessarily their own lives.

## II. Faith Exemplified (Hebrews 11: 4a, 7a, 8, 17-18, 20-23, 32)

**By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice:** The difference between the sacrifice of Cain and the sacrifice of Abel (Genesis 4:3-5) was not between animal and vegetable. The difference was that Abel's sacrifice was made by faith.

**Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen:** Noah was warned of something that had never happened before. His faith was shown in not merely agreeing that the flood would come, but in doing what God told him to do regarding the flood – he was moved with godly fear.

**By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out:** When God called Abraham to follow Him, Abram (as he was known then), lived in Ur of the Chaldees. Abram was not from a God fearing family. Abram's father had been an idolater. Ur was a city of great wealth. Abram's family was thought by historians to be very well to do. Abraham did step out in faith, going to the place God promised him; but his faith was less than perfect. This was seen by comparing Genesis 12:1-5 with Acts 7:2-4, where it is evident that Abraham first went half way to where God called him, and only *eventually* obeyed completely. Yet thousands of years later, God did not "remember" the delayed obedience, only the faith.

**By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac:** Abraham offering up his only son Isaac, was a type and shadow of God the Father offering up His only Son Jesus Christ. The shadow is never exactly like the happening the shadow was made from. In this particular instance, Abraham was stopped by someone greater than himself. When the Father God offered up His Son there was no greater to stop Him.

**Offered up his only begotten son:** Though Abraham had another son (Ishmael, the son of his fleshly attempt to fulfill God's promise), God did not recognize the other son (Genesis 22:1-14) – so Isaac could be called his only begotten son.

**By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come:** We find two totally different types of blessings that Isaac blessed his two sons with. Jacob got the right hand blessing, which is the best blessing. The right hand blessing is the blessing in the spirit. Esau received the left hand blessing, which was a flesh blessing.

**By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph:** Jacob led a rather carnal life. Yet his faith could also look beyond death – and he blessed each of his sons.

**And worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff:** Jacob had to lean on the top of his staff or his "bed." The two words (staff, bed), in Hebrew have exactly the same consonants. He leaned because he was given a limp many years before when God confronted him at Peniel (Genesis 32:24-32). As he leaned on his staff he remembered that God was great and held his future and the future of his descendants. Therefore, he worshiped, demonstrating his faith and dependence on God.

**By faith Joseph:** Joseph spent all his adult life in Egypt, and even though he was a fourth-generation heir of the promise given to Abraham, he never returned to Canaan while he was alive. Yet, facing death, he still had faith that God would fulfill His promise and demonstrated that confidence by making his brothers promise to take his bones back to Canaan for burial.

**Gave instructions concerning his bones:** When Joseph died he was never buried. His coffin laid above ground for the 400 or so years until it was taken back to Canaan. It was a silent witness all those years that Israel *was* going back to the Promised Land, just as God had said.

**By faith Moses... was hidden three months by his parents:** Moses' parents showed faith when they perceived that he was specially favored by God they took measures of faith to save his life despite danger.

**They were not afraid of the king's command:** When the Pharaoh of Egypt commanded the murder of Hebrew children faith gave Moses' parents the courage to obey God instead of man.

**And what shall I more say:** All of the men listed in this verse held a position of power or authority, but none of them is praised for his personal status or abilities. Instead, they are recognized for what each one had accomplished by faith in God.

### III. Faith Rewarded (Hebrews 11:39-40)

**And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:"** These all believed in Messiah. They were looking for a city whose maker was God. As we said, they all believed and it was counted unto them as righteousness. The faith of Old Testament saints looked forward to the promised salvation, whereas the faith of those after Christ looks back to the fulfillment of the promise. Both groups are characterized by genuine faith and are saved by Christ's atoning work on the cross (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Their faithfulness makes our faith a little easier. The writer to the Hebrews began this chapter speaking of faith in the *present* tense: *Now faith is... By faith we understand* (Hebrews 11:1 and 11:3). The end of the chapter reminds us that faith *is* and it is for *we* who follow in the footsteps of the faithful men and women of previous ages.

"It is what Christ has done that opens the way into the very presence of God for them as for us. Only the work of Christ brings those of Old Testament times and those of the new and living way alike into the presence of God." (Morris)

## Lesson Summary

Hebrews 11 dives deeply into the writer's application of all the information given so far. Chapter 10 ended with both a warning and a word of encouragement. That encouragement specifically referred to “those who have faith,” in contrast to “those who shrink back” (Hebrews 10:39). Here, in this passage, the writer gives a direct definition of faith, along with numerous examples to make his meaning crystal clear.

Faith, according to the Bible, is not blind. More than half of the verses in the book of Hebrews are dedicated to explaining reasons and evidence to accept the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Nor is faith gullible, or senseless. Instead, godly faith is exemplified by *trust*. That trust is based on what we know of God, relying on Him for the things we do not know. In particular, godly faith looks forward, from an eternal perspective, and produces obedience, even in the face of hardship. God takes what we cannot see, or cannot understand, and uses it to make good on His word. Since faith relies on what we've seen of God, and trusts Him for the future, it becomes the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1–3).

Most of the rest of the chapter is devoted to giving examples from Scripture to clarify this particular definition of faith. In each case, the same basic pattern emerges. These figures knew enough about God to trust Him, and so they obeyed, even when they were faced with doubts or challenges. In some cases, this meant trusting that God's promises were ultimately meant to be fulfilled in eternity, not necessarily their own lives.

Though the printed text skips around the chapter this week, we can still understand the following lessons regarding faith:

- **It is responsive:** By faith Abraham, when called ... obeyed. It is sacrificial and courageous: Abraham was willing, went from all that was secure and began his travels not knowing where he was going.
- **Faith is persistent:** Abraham and **his sons** lived in tents. They did not see the land as their own, but exercised faith knowing that God would be true to his word. Abraham looked forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.
- **It is dependent:** To those as good as dead the child of promise was given.
- **Faith conquers our fears.** Moses' parents were not afraid of the king's edict.

In the verses which close the chapter we are introduced to a vast company whose names we may never know, but whose heroic faith will be not only remembered but treasured. By faith God's justice is enforced, God's promises are received, and God's power made manifest, even in resurrection. It is by such faith that weakness was turned to strength. By faith people are enabled to cope with wild beasts, raging fire and aggressive warriors. In all these cases faith was a forceful, active ingredient, and always essential to life.