

Hebrews 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 11. Now faith is the assurance of things hopeful, the conviction of things not seen, for by it the people of old receive their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts, and through his faith though he died he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up, so that he should not see death, and he was not found because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God, and without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them, and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your offspring be named. He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the

Israelites, and gave directions concerning his bones. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God, than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who was invisible. By faith he kept the Passover, and sprinkled the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea, as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. And what more shall I say?

[3 : 58] For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect. Hebrews 11 is one of the most famous chapters of the New Testament. It's a great roll call of the faith. It takes the heroes from the beginning of creation to the coming of Christ. As

Gareth Cockerell observes, it serves a number of purposes within the argument of the book. It clarifies the nature of faith that the heroes of the book are being charged to emulate. It provides us with models to follow, a motivation for faithfulness in the present. The models provided by the faithful of the past are also partial prefigurations of the faithfulness of Christ, the ultimate example of faithfulness, by which the full reality is finally realised.

Finally, the company of the faithful from all generations is an alternative community to which to belong, and with which to identify, especially in contexts of great pressure to apostatise. Such a community is of immense value. The examples of the saints of all ages have long served as examples for Christians to follow, helping them to persevere and be faithful in difficult times. The list of this chapter gives the Christians being addressed a sense of their heritage, but it is not just a straightforward telling of the story of Israel. The unfaithfulness of Israel, especially in the wilderness generation, had served as a cautionary example earlier in the book.

Now we are presented with another way of reading the Old Testament history, one that traces the theme of faith throughout, one that reaches its climax in Christ, and one in which we can find ourselves. The examples that are given inspire and encourage, and they also give more clarity, giving us a sense of what faith will look like in various situations.

We should recognise also the way that this chapter unpacks the meaning of Habakkuk 2, verse 4, the righteous shall live by his faith. The chapter begins with a definition of faith.

[6 : 48] Faith is oriented to the future, and also to that which is present but unseen concerning God's existence and work. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 7, the Apostle Paul contrasts walking by faith to walking by sight. Faith enables us to perceive things that others do not, things that are invisible.

The person of faith can live in terms of God's existence, his promise, his providence, his power and his faithfulness. This is the horizon in terms of which they live their lives. And this way of living by faith enabled the great heroes of old to do their great deeds.

Without such faith, the sort of faith that the recipients of the book need at that moment in time, they would not have done what they once did. The opening statement, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, might be better translated in stronger terms.

Faith is the reality of things hoped for. It isn't just a subjective sense. Faith, for the author of Hebrews, is not just a state of mind. It's a concrete way of life.

Faith operates in terms of the reality of the things that are anticipated. While others can drift aimless, as if through empty space, faith moves in the powerful gravitational field of the realities hoped for and promised by God. Again, faith is the evidence of things not seen, not merely the conviction of them, as the ESV translates. Faith itself is objective evidence of unseen things, much as the movement of a body in space in its orbit can serve as evidence of a much larger yet unseen body that's acting upon it. When we look at the lives of people of faith, we can see something of the power and the reality of something much greater than anything that can be seen acting upon them. And the author of Hebrews starts with creation, in order to move sequentially through the entire Old Testament. But a deeper claim is made in verse 3. What he is saying is that the ultimate reality, the thing that underlies everything else, that is deeper, more real, and more true than everything else, is the word and the power of God. The most fundamental reality is not what is visible and immediately tangible. God founded the creation by his word and power, and it is by these things that true reality here and now is also determined. Those who act in terms of the unseen facts of God's power and

word are living in terms of foundational reality itself. And he retells the primeval history.

[9 : 15] Abel, of course, is the first martyr. But yet he is praised not for his martyrdom so much as something that happened before it, his offering of a more acceptable sacrifice. Cain responded to his rejection of his sacrifice with anger, revealing something about the character of his offering, as an attempt to control God. He was angry when he did not get what he wanted from God. Whereas Abel, by contrast, offered in a way that was accepted. It's not just the objective reality that he offered, it was the way that he offered too. He's an example of true sacrifice, which anticipates his martyrdom, when he will offer himself up in some sense. Sacrifice was also here, as Hebrews is suggesting, always about faith, not mere visible ritual. What really mattered was not just the offering itself, it was the faith by which it was given. Earlier he has quoted Psalm 40 verse 6, to make the point that what God wants is not primarily sacrifice and offering, but the heart that is oriented to do his will, with the law of God written upon it. And Abel is, of course, an example of this. His offering of a right sacrifice arises from a heart of faith that is set towards God.

From the example of Abel, he moves to Enoch. Enoch was taken by God, so that he did not experience death. He was saved from death. This was evidence that he pleased or walked with God. Abel and Enoch, in their particular ways, both pleased God. And the author of Hebrews reasons, in both cases, from their pleasing of God, Abel by his sacrifice, and Enoch by the fact that the Lord took him, back to their faith. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Faith pleases God, because it is faith that corresponds to God's power and his promise. It is faith that lives in terms of God's existence, the things not seen. And it is faith that lives in terms of the future that he proclaims, things hopeful. Both Abel and Enoch exemplify this. Noah is a further example from the primeval history. He is an example of the future orientation of faith. With reverent fear, he acted. He recognises the reality of God's power and holiness, and lives and acts accordingly. The story of the flood is a paradigmatic example of the last judgment in the New Testament. And the author of Hebrews has been encouraging people to live in terms of the seriousness and severity of God's judgment. As in the case of Noah, the prospect of God's judgment in the future should shape their action in the present. Verses 3-7 concern the primeval history, and verses 8-22 move into the patriarchal history. Abraham, of course, is the father of the Jews and also of the faithful. Abraham and Moses receive the most attention within this chapter because they are such central figures. Abraham had to surrender his past for the sake of a promise. He had to leave behind his country, his kindred and his father's house, and move forward to receive a promise that God held out for him.

He had to hold all of these things that he once possessed with an open hand and allow God to remove them from it. He had to surrender all of the things that seemed so solid and sure and immediate for the sake of a word from God concerning the long distant future. He lived as a stranger and a sojourner in the land that was promised to him. He looked forward to something even greater, of which the promised land was just a symbol. He looked for a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. This city is a thing not seen. It's a thing hoped for. And yet, despite that fact, the author of Hebrews wants us to have a sense of its great solidity. God is the builder of this city. The God who created the world has created this city too. Our cities here may seem secure, but the implication of this statement is that they lack foundations. This is the city that has true reality. The deepest reality is not what is immediate to us, but what lies in the realm of God's promise and word. Sarah receives the power to conceive. The child of promise is not just the child of the flesh. It isn't just that she has a child, but rather that the child and all the future that the child holds in store is received from the promise and the power and the purpose of God. The child is not received through human power, and the child's purpose will not be achieved through human power. Faith weans people off the immediacy of the world. Those things that once seemed so powerful and secure begin to be recognized as insubstantial creatures of time, things that will soon pass. Only the word of God will endure. We ground ourselves in something beyond the present age and the immediacy of what is before us. We recognize that we have a much greater homeland. This isn't just some idyllic past that we have left behind and desire to return to. It's the promise of God's future, the promise of a heavenly city and homeland. God is not ashamed to be called the God of such persons. Faith corresponds to his power and his promise, and thereby pleases him. The point of faith is not some power inherent in faith itself, but rather its responsiveness to a power and reality outside of itself. Abraham offers up Isaac.

[14 : 34] This is the final test. At the beginning, with his call, he had to surrender everything from his past, and in the offering up of Isaac, he has to surrender everything that he thought was certain about his future. God's promise had to be recognized as surer than life itself. His trust was not in the son that he could see and touch, but in the promise of God that gave that son to him, and if that son were to die, could give him back again. We have an example of this, of course, in the story of the Shunammite woman. She receives a child from the Lord, and when that child is taken by death, goes to the prophet Elisha, and in faith receives that child back. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are all mentioned as those who blessed their sons concerning things to come. Jacob's blessing of the two sons of Joseph is particularly singled out. It is a more theological blessing than some of the others. We see this in Genesis chapter 48 verses 15 to 16. And he blessed Joseph and said, The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys, and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. He's passing on, transmitting the blessing that he himself has known, looking towards the future, acting towards that horizon of God's promise. And Joseph does the same. He calls for his bones to be taken up out of Egypt in the future. In anticipation of the Exodus, he makes those instructions of all the events of Joseph's life. This is the thing that stands out to the author of Hebrews. He sees this future event of the Exodus, and he makes instructions concerning his bones, his deliverance from death, as it were, his deliverance from the land of Egypt into the land of Canaan. And when they go out of Egypt, they take Joseph's bones, and the very end of the story of Joshua is the burial of Joseph's bones. Joseph anticipates a deliverance from the grave, a deliverance of his bones into the land of promise, a deliverance that anticipates a greater deliverance from the grave, the deliverance of resurrection. Joseph anticipated the Exodus in the instructions that he gave concerning his bones. And the story of Moses and the Exodus follows, in verses 23 to 31. There are parallels with the Abraham section, parallels that play out in reverse order. There's deliverance of Moses from death, like Isaac was delivered from death. There's opposition from the world, like the alienation faced by the patriarchs. The departure from Egypt corresponds with Abraham's departure for the place of God's promise. Moses' parents are introduced as people of faith. There is a heritage of faith that Moses continues in. They perceive that he was a beautiful child.

Acts 7 20 maybe conveys something of what is meant by this. At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful in God's sight. Like Isaac was only begotten, they recognised that there was something special about Moses through faith. Abraham had other children beyond Isaac, but Isaac was uniquely singled out as the child of promise, and it seems that Moses' parents recognised something similar about him. He wasn't just a child that they loved dearly, he had some part to play in God's purposes. And they weren't afraid of the king's edict concerning the killing of the baby boys, because they recognised something greater, a power that exceeded the power of Pharaoh. Moses accepted persecution with the people of God. He forwent his privileges as a son of the daughter of Pharaoh. Such an identification was costly. He had to give up the fleeting pleasures of sin for persecution for the promises of God, things that are far more enduring and valuable.

[18 : 28] He took on the reproach of Christ. Considering that Moses lived long before the incarnation of Christ, it may seem strange to talk about him taking on the reproach of Christ. However, faith is fundamentally that which acts in terms of God's appointed future, and those things that are unseen. Moses had some sense of the glories that awaited, and lived in terms of them. He acted as one seeing God, and seeing the future that he held out. This was seen in the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, events that exhibited God's power over those things that are trusted by those who live by sight. And here the Israelites also showed faith. They walked through the Red Sea on dry ground, trusting God while the prospect of death lay around them on all those other sides. The power of God was seen as the people responded to him in faith. And the falling of the walls of Jericho were also an example of the people's faith. God gave them an instruction, an instruction that seemed entirely nonsensical, but unless they did this, they would not have known the victory. This was something done in a situation of great peril.

They had crossed the Jordan into the promised land. This was the first city that they were facing. And if they lost at this city, or faced some setback, there would be no easy route of retreat.

Indeed, if they saw signs of weakness, the people of the land might well get together and crushed them. It took a lot of bravery to take such an action. But that bravery made sense in the light of faith. They saw the power and the promise of God, and they acted accordingly. Rahab is the last of the main examples of the list of persons of faith. She was someone who responded to God's word, his power and his promise. She had heard reports of the Lord and his promise, and she believed what she heard and acted accordingly. She was a prostitute, blessed not on account of what she deserved, but on the basis of God's grace and good pleasure. She was delivered from death, as she identified with the people of God, even at that moment where they might have seemed most vulnerable, and where that identification could prove most costly. The author of Hebrews could continue the tour through the Old Testament, but he hastens us through the long corridor, past many doors he could have shown us into, a number of them quite surprising. We might not expect to see characters such as Samson and Jephthah in the list, for instance. He traces the story through these characters, through the judges, into the story of the kingdom, and through that into the story of the prophets. Faith is seen in a host of different situations, in battle, in perseverance through suffering, in accepting opposition and alienation. We can notice a movement from battles and military struggles to a focus upon persecution, suffering, rejection, from the faith of judges and kings to the faith of the prophets, whose struggle was often a much lonelier one. We should also recognize a number of the events that are alluded to, from tradition and from scripture. The Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4 is an example of a woman receiving her dead son back. According to tradition, Jeremiah was stoned, Isaiah was sawn in two.

Wandering about in the wilderness might remind us of Elijah. The world considered such people unworthy, and despised and rejected them. However, in the process they presented themselves as unworthy of the people of faith. There is throughout scripture a test of hospitality that's given. If the people of God are welcomed in a place, that place can often be blessed on their account, but if they are rejected, that place will suffer judgment. The faithful heroes of the book of Hebrews are to look to these figures as their forerunners in the faith, heirs with them of a promise of God. But the forerunners did not receive that promise. It's only through Christ's high priestly work that the promise of God has been brought into more concrete reality. The people of God now more directly receive benefits that these forerunners could only anticipate and await. We have been perfected, made fit to enter God's presence through Christ's work, and now they can share in what we have received.

[22 : 36] A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can grow through the examples of the lives of the forerunners in the faith? What are some ways in which such lives testify to the truth of God?

A question to consider. What are some ways in which we can grow through the faith? What are some ways in which