

Hebrews

Series 2

Lesson 12

“Hebrews Chapter 11”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God’s people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God’s word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

As we come to chapter 11 and the “roll call” of the heroes and heroines of faith this chapter reinforces the exhortations given in 10:35-39. At verse 2, the author declares that by faith “the elders” (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι - “the presbyters”) received “approval” (ἐμαρτυρήθησαν) for their faith. This verb is used seven times in Hebrews (7:8, 17; 10:15; 11:2, 4, 5, 39). In each of the instances it gives reference to the testimony of the biblical record. It is also of interest that the author uses a noun form (μαρτύρων) that is akin to the verb when he refers to the heroes and heroines of the faith using the phrase “cloud of witnesses” at 12:1. Our English word martyr derives from this Greek word and came to indicate a person who witnesses to his, or her faith through their death. This review of sacred history, in Hebrews, is similar to other reviews in Jewish and Christian literature (cf. 4 Maccabees 16:16-23¹; Wisdom 10) of a similar type. In Hebrews 11, the history of the people of God from creation through the

¹ ¹⁶ “My sons, noble is the contest to which you are called to bear witness for the nation. Fight zealously for our ancestral law. ¹⁷ For it would be shameful if, while an aged man endures such agonies for the sake of religion, you young men were to be terrified by tortures. ¹⁸ Remember that it is through God that you have had a share in the world and have enjoyed life, ¹⁹ and therefore you ought to endure any suffering for the sake of God. ²⁰ For his sake also our father Abraham was zealous to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation; and when Isaac saw his father’s hand wielding a knife and descending upon him, he did not cower. ²¹ Daniel the righteous was thrown to the lions, and Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were hurled into the fiery furnace and endured it for the sake of God. ²² You too must have the same faith in God and not be grieved. ²³ It is unreasonable for people who have religious knowledge not to withstand pain.” NRSV.

Maccabean revolt of the Second Century B.C. is laid out as an illustration of genuine virtue.²

The theme extolled as a virtue, in this section, was introduced at 10:37-38 by means of a quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4 and it is the virtue of “endurance.” The theme requires faith as a prerequisite to endurance. The reality that comes as a result of faith can provide motivation in order to be able to endure verbal and physical abuse and to do that which is right before God. Biblical faith includes both the aspect of gift and action.³ Both streams are found in the biblical text. We find James focusing on the action part of faith in his epistle while we find a focus on the gift aspect in places in the writings of Paul (cf. James 2:14-26; Romans 12:6-9; Ephesians 2:8-10). The biblical text gives us a view of faith that is paradoxical with the concept of it being a gift and yet with it also action on part of the recipient is required. Faith that is Biblical holds a tension that is often difficult for us to reduce to a simple formula. This is perhaps more to do with our wanting to reduce it in such a manner rather than recognizing the

² Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 259.

³ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 259-260.


truth that affective faith must be both a gift of God and something is active in order to truly be affective.

The author of Hebrews recognizes that true faith cannot help but produce action. This chapter begins with a description of faith (verses 1-3). It then moves on to a catalogue of people of faith that are shown to be faithful through their actions and not merely through some form of esoteric, philosophical, intellectual assent.⁴ Faith is connected in verse 1 with the idea of “confidence” and “assurance” (ὕπόστασις). This “confidence,” as if under the scrutiny of a trial comes from evidence that though not seen is yet convincing (ἐλεγχος). There is a connection made here that connects the things, unseen with the faith of those whose lives are changed and formed by them. There is a connection made with the concept of faith that links it to something beyond physical proof and into a realm of trust that runs deeper than mere physical evidence. This faith is linked to that which is unseen, as is the God behind those things which are seen; He too is unseen. Despite the fact that God is unseen and much of what might be considered evidence in a court, the people that will be listed later

⁴ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 260.

in this chapter had a real, a substantive, relationship with this invisible God through their “trust” (πίστις). This “trust” goes beyond mere reason and certainly beyond full understanding. This “trust” holds as an anchor the realization that God is absolutely good, that He is sovereign, and that in reality there is no way to fully comprehend Him. The call is then to “trust” in Him, who is unseen.

It is in this “trust” (verse 3) that we understand that the worlds (τοὺς αἰῶνας) were “set in order” by the “word” (ῥήματι) of God. This verse provides a greater development of the idea of “the evidence of things not seen” that was declared in verse 1. The initial act of creation was not seen by any man and those things that were made were created from things “not visible.” Often we immediately begin to translate this into one of the multiple scientific theories that we as humans have, or even to postulate a new one that is of our own design. What is of crucial importance, to the author of Hebrews, is that people of “faith,” “trust,” and recognize that God is the agent of creation and as such holds a unique place that none other can hold, or rightly claim. That which is “real” is not directly connected to that which is seen. In



other words just because it cannot be seen does not make it unreal, as a matter of fact God is more real than the things that are seen and this reality will be demonstrated in the lives and actions of the people of faith that will be given in the list that follows.

The roll call of people of faith begins with Abel (verse 4). The author of Hebrews will use as his source material for the record of his people of faith both the Old Testament and also other Jewish and Christian traditions outside of what we call the Old Testament. For the account of Abel the writer depends upon Genesis 4:3-5a as the basis for his statement. Of course there are later Jewish traditions related to this account as natural questions arise out of that account. Question one is why did God find the sacrifice of Abel acceptable, but found Cain's unacceptable? A second question is how did the brothers know that God found one acceptable and the other unacceptable? The author of Hebrews demonstrates no interest in these questions, but simply states as fact the answer that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable because it was offered in "faith."⁵

⁵ Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 263.

At verse 5, we have recounted the next hero, Enoch, who was “taken” by God and we are informed that he “pleased” (εὐαρεστηκέναι) God. The word used here carries with it the meaning of “to please,” or “to satisfy.” It could equally well have been translated that Enoch “satisfied” God. We are then perhaps left with the question of how, but the answer will soon follow in verse 6. The basis for this pleasing, or satisfying of God was to be found in Enoch’s faith. So often we associate the pleasure of God with a person doing the right thing, or being of the right character. In truth, there is validity in this, but the reason for doing the right thing, or being of right character, is of crucial importance. In Hebrews, as in Biblical history as a whole, motivation is critical. Here the author of Hebrews calls upon his readers to see the connection clearly. Those who would “please” God must first “believe” that he exists and they must also believe that He rewards (μισθαποδότης) those who seek Him. He rewards those who trust Him in spite of the fact that He is an unseen God and is credited with unseen things. There is a connection made between trust and this aspect of not being seen.

God rewards those who are devoted to Him and demonstrate this devotion in their character and in their actions.

This theme continues as we see the faith of Noah demonstrated in His trust of God being given form in the building of an ark on the basis that he (Noah) was warned by God of something never before seen, or even heard. Because of this “trust” in God, Noah would inherit the world cleansed by the waters of the flood, but more importantly he was an inheritor of righteousness that came about as a result of his trust in God. There is a powerful connection made between righteousness and the inheritance that is received from God for belief in the unseen. How then can we tell if a person has faith? We can tell because of their actions. It is possible for us to see this trust that is based in that which is unseen. In verse 8, we are told that Abraham “obeyed” (ὕπηκουσεν). He heard what God wanted him to do and he responded in actions of obedience. He set out from his family and from his home without knowing where he was going, or even what to expect. He passed this amazing faith onto his child and grandchild who also trusted in the invisible promise of God.

Abraham stayed in this place because of his trust in God, even though life was hard and there were many dangers. He trusted God to help him overcome these obstacles and the fact that he stayed visibly demonstrates this. Verse 10 indicates that Abraham did this not because of the new land that he travelled to, but on the basis of his trust in God. The author of Hebrews indicates that he looked “forward to” (ἐξεδέχεται - waited for expectantly) the “city” that has foundations. This was a city that would really last because its architect and builder is God. In verse 11, we are informed that Abraham was rewarded for his trust in God by being granted the “power” of procreation even though he was too old and Sarah was “sterile” (στεῖρα). This gift was received by Abraham and Sarah because Abraham “considered him faithful” who had made the promise of a child. Abraham “trusted” God in spite of everything he saw to the contrary. People would have said it is not possible and it is not reasonable to expect a child at his age.

There is great power in the faith of this one person; this man that was old and as good as “dead.” The results of the faith of this one man was that now he has descendants that are beyond

counting. God rewarded his trusting God to do what He said against all odds and beyond all human reason. At verse 13, there is a break in the listing and a focus is drawn upon their trust and their character. Despite the fact that they lived in the land of promise they were expecting something more, something greater than merely this land. They desire a country that is not “earthly,” but one that is “heavenly.” They desired to live with God, in His presence, under His rule, and under His justice. Even in their expectation is the expression of faith that God has indeed “prepared” (ἠτοίμασεν) a city for them (verse 16). These verses reflect observations of the author of Hebrews regarding them and the nature of their faith.

At verse 17, the author displays the faith of Abraham as being “put to the test” (πειραζόμενος). This test came in the form of God asking Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. All reason would perhaps have dictated that this was the wrong course of action, but we are told that Abraham believed that God could even bring someone back from the dead (Genesis 22:1-19) and he “was ready to offer up” his only son. Abraham trusts God and is willing to do what God says rather than to follow his own

reason and his own way of thinking. This is a distinctive mark of the faith of this great patriarch. The list goes on at verse 20 recounting the invocation of blessings for his sons Jacob and Esau. This required faith in God. In the same way Jacob (verse 21) demonstrates his faith in God by blessing the sons of Joseph even while he is dying.

At verse 22, we are reminded of the great faith of Joseph as he gave instructions regarding the burial of his body (Genesis 50:24-26). Joseph expected to be buried, not in Egypt, but in the land promised to Abraham. He expected the people to carry his body home when they returned to the land of promise. The great list continues recounting (verse 23) how Moses was hidden for three months after his birth and did not “fear” the edict of the king. When Moses was grown he chose to side with the people of God rather than with Pharaoh, despite the wealth, power, and security that would have come with this. He chose to reject the “pleasures of sin” (verse 25) and instead to be “disgraced” for Christ. He considered the promise of God to be of greater value (verse 26) than the wealth of Egypt. Not only that, but it is stated that he considered “disgrace” for Christ to be of more value than

the wealth of Egypt. His eyes were fixed upon the future reward promised by God. Because of this faith he left Egypt unafraid of the king's anger (verse 27). He persevered as though he could actually see the invisible (ἀόρατον) God. Notice how the author of Hebrews connects even the faith of Moses directly to faith in Christ.

In this incredible list the author continues recounting how Moses kept the Passover, following the instructions of God and as a result the firstborn of Israel were spared death and left untouched (verse 28), while the firstborn of the Egyptians, the great superpower of the ancient world, perished helplessly amid screams of anguish and pain. Verses 29-31 recount additional indications of the people of Israel as they passed through sea on dry land, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down and the faith of "Rahab the prostitute" is cited because of her receiving the spies in peace. The text indicates that she did not perish with those who were "disobedient" (ἀπειθήσασιν). This word indicates both the aspect of "disobedience," but also the aspect of "unbelief." The others who died did not believe in the invisible God who guided the people of Israel in their undertaking.


The list continues at verse 32 with the expectation that the audience are familiar enough with the stories that only the names and a very brief account is necessary to make the point that these were people who trusted the unseen God and obeyed Him often in dire and dangerous circumstances. They distinguished themselves by conquering kingdoms, administering justice, obtaining promises, closing the mouths of lions (verse 33), quenching raging fire (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). The three activities in verse 34 are focused on military acts of valor and are applicable to several of the characters listed above and some would say it applies, it especially to putting foreign armies to flight in the time of the Maccabees.

At verse 35, there is a change from apparent victories of these heroic figures to those who were willing to suffer for a better reward than was offered in this life. Of course there is some reference to the account of the widow at Zarephath of Sidon (1 Kings 17:17-24 and to the Shunemite woman whose son was restored to her through the faith of Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37). This was a temporary reprieve, while those who are true heroes look for something greater and more lasting than this. Those tortured,

and yet refusing to accept release is likely a reference to an account recorded in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42, where Eleazar and a mother and her seven sons are martyred by Antiochus Epiphanes and his soldiers. At verse 36 we are told of those who experienced “mocking and flogging” and even “chains and imprisonment.” This was applicable to the servants of God in almost every generation, but applies especially to the prophets of God.

The account in verse 37, applies especially to the prophets like Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:21), or to Jeremiah, who according to legend was stoned to death in Egypt. They were “sawn in two,” the fate ascribed to Isaiah and the going about in the skins of sheep and goats, destitute and tormented, is likely a reference to Elijah and Elisha. In verse 38 we are told that the “world” (ὁ κόσμος) was not “worthy” of such as these. These were people who wandered in solitude, desolation, in mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

The final two verses tie the chapter together by repeating the claim that these spiritual ancestors of the readers “were commended for their faith.” In spite of this, they did not receive what they were promised during their lifetime. They were still



looking for the real fulfillment of what they believed and trusted that God would bring to them when they died. The same promise that they longed for and sought is the promise through which the readers could be “made perfect,” or “complete.” The author here makes a powerful connection indicating that what they have in Jesus Christ is what all these great people of faith longed for, and trusted God to bring. Masterfully the connection is made that ties their belief in Christ together with the ancient stories of faith to demonstrate that they now can share in the hope and the vision of these great men and women of faith in Christ. They are challenged to stay the course as did those who have gone before.


The challenge is to trust in the unseen God and to not turn back as some of them are thinking of doing. The challenge set before them is to stay the course and to enter their name alongside this great figures of the past in following after this invisible God who has now more fully revealed His image and His will in His Son Jesus Christ. The challenge stands not only for them, but for us today too. Will we trust in God and follow Him above all else, in spite of all else.

Synopsis

At the end of chapter 10 the audience was challenged that they “...are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but are among those who have faith and are saved.” Chapter 11 begins by defining the nature of faith in terms of hope and conviction based in the unseen. This invisible aspect is prominent and important in understanding the nature of faith.

We are then given a list that starts with Abel and will move through history to give examples of what faith looks like in varying circumstances and times. This list will include what “pleases” God and even stipulate that without “faith” it is not possible to please God. In order to approach God one must believe that he actually exists. Faith also is connected with obedience to the instructions and call of God as is powerfully demonstrated in Noah’s building of the ark and of Abraham’s leaving his home.

Trust in the promises and goodness of God are essential elements in faith. With trust there is nothing that is impossible, through faith. Despite faith, and often because of faith, life will be harder than it would be without faith in many ways. Faith drives




people to do hard things, things that get them in trouble, and at times challenge them to take a far harder way. Faith focuses upon God in such a way that the vision is toward the heavenly and not toward the earthly.

Faith, will at times, be tested and requires a trust of God that goes beyond what is humanly logical. Faith entails seeing the possibilities through the eyes of God and not through human abilities and human understanding. Faith requires great perseverance and endurance. Faith also calls us to obedience and at times loneliness and solitude. Faith causes us to hope, to strive, and to endure looking for something far better than this life and this earth. Faith challenges us to grow in maturity.

Questions

1. What are some things that provide you with security in your life?
2. Where do you seek approval for how you live? Why?
3. Why do you believe that God made the worlds?
4. Why do you think faith pleases God?
5. What are some examples of faith that inspire you?
6. What are some ways that faith speaks even beyond the life of the person who has it?
7. What do you think it means for God to be “pleased?”
8. Why do you think it is impossible to please God without faith?
9. Why do you think it is important to believe that God exists?
10. What do you think it means to be an “heir to righteousness?”
11. How do you think having faith condemns the world?
12. How are faith and obedience connected as we find them in 11:8?
13. What are some things that people today do to demonstrate that they are looking for a city whose architect and builder is God?

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14. How do you see faith as connected with not seeing with the physical eyes?
 15. What do you think it would mean for God to be ashamed of someone?
Why?
 16. How is testing related to faith? What are some ways that people are tested today?
 17. How is faith connected with fear (11:23)?
 18. How do our choices demonstrate our faith?
 19. How is disobedience connected with faith?
 20. Does faith mean a person will have an easy, or blessed, life?
 21. What do you think is the hallmark of faith?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

In this section the author wants us to understand that the ancient people of faith, so familiar to the audience, were looking forward to Christ, despite not being able to fully know all that this would entail. Faith is the ability to trust in more than what is seen, felt, tasted and touched. It goes beyond human logic and it changes our reality. What are some ways that your beliefs about Jesus change the way that you live your life?

Where is God in these words?

God is found in these words standing behind these great stories of faith when people who believed in Him did things, and participated in things, not possible apart from His intervention and presence. God leads and directs these people of faith to recognize that we are limited and that we need to rely upon Him as the unlimited creator and as a God of unlimited good. What are some ways that you think people today find it challenging to believe in God?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The words of this chapter are intended to make a connection between the past and the present in a manner that causes the audience to question their basis for life. They are challenged to be like these great heroes and to live life in such a way as to demonstrate their trust in God by their actions and their reactions. They are called to stand with God even though the whole world would stand against them. How does hearing stories of faith challenge us to view life differently?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God, here, is calling us to endure and to stand steadfast in our faith in Him and in what He calls us to do. We are challenged to believe in the invisible God and to expect the impossible, because with God all things are possible. We are called upon to endure hardship, or victory, in thankfulness and in trust of God. We are called to mature and to grow into the perfection that was and is demonstrated in Jesus Christ. What do you think that people see as the most challenging aspect today, of obediently following after God?