

GOD WITH US

Part 11: LATER LETTERS

Message 7 – Hebrews The Supremacy of Christ Hebrews 11-13

Introduction

The book of Hebrews focuses on the *supremacy of Christ* for one profound reason: the writer is calling his audience to *persevering faith* in difficult times. This is possible with a clearer understanding of Jesus, their *great God and High Priest*. The first 10 chapters emphasized the different ways that Jesus is superior to various aspects of the Old Testament system of religion. Interspersed through these chapters we found exhortations to endure in faith, to hold fast the confession, to not turn back. Now, as the letter moves toward a conclusion, the theme of *persevering faith* comes into the foreground. The writer will describe the kind of faith that continues to trust God no matter what is happening on earth, and no matter how difficult it becomes to maintain allegiance to Him. A key part of this section is the extended list of examples, from the Old Testament, of people who held fast to their faith in God amidst the varying circumstances of life. They kept their eyes on the rewards that awaited them in the unseen world, as they endured trials associated with their faith in the visible world. In fact, Jesus, Who is supreme over all, provided the greatest example of remaining true to the Father's will for His life (offering His life as a sacrifice for sins) in light of the reward set before Him (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Examples of Enduring Faith: 11

Chapter 11 is known as the "Faith Hall of Fame." The chapter begins with an explanation of the nature of faith itself.

A definition of Faith: 11:1,2

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old gained approval" (11:1,2).

The word "*assurance*" comes from two Greek words meaning "to stand under." This word implies the exact opposite of the word used in 3:12 "falling away" ("to stand apart from"). True faith "stands under" the promises of God, that we can claim with full assurance, rather than "standing apart" from them. The word "*conviction*" means "*assured, confident belief, based on God's Word.*" Biblical

“faith” is not credulity, or “believing what is unbelievable.” It is not a “blind leap of faith.” Rather, **biblical faith** is “*confident assurance based on the Word of God, the character of God and the promises of God.*” Biblical faith is rooted in the reliability of the Person of God. Because of who God is, we can have confidence (faith, trust) in His Word. God is “trustworthy” – or, worthy of our trust (faith).

Enduring Faith from Creation to Sarah: 11:3-12

In this section, the writer moves through the early chapters of Genesis to find examples of faith. He begins with the creation story itself.

“By faith we understand that the world has been created by the word of God so that what is seen has not been made out of things that are visible” (11:3).

Genesis 1 tells us that the world was formed by the word of God. In some mysterious way God spoke- “*Let there be...*” It is “*By faith*” that we accept this truth. Scientists who study the origins of our universe can get us back to the “Big Bang” at the beginning of time. The Bible invites us to see with eyes of faith one step beyond the Big Bang to the Creator Who, through His powerful decree, initiated the creative process with intentionality and design. Bible scholars differ on the amount of time that has existed that determines the age of the universe and the earth, yet they agree that the Bible answers the ultimate question of the origin of life.

It takes more “faith” to be an atheist than it does to be a theist. An atheist must believe that everything created itself; that everything that exists came about through chance occurrence, some random collision of molecules and forces in time past, some ‘self-designing process’ that has ultimately resulted in everything we now see and experience. And not only must the creative process be ‘natural’ and ‘impersonal,’ but our existence within this process can have no meaning. Our only “purpose” is to play our pre-determined part in the ongoing collision of molecules that is advancing or regressing to no meaningful end. A more “reasoned” step of faith is to acknowledge that some very wise and personal Designer intended for all of this to happen. I am here by divine design, not by sheer chance.

Personal examples of faith follow, including Abel (Gen.4) and Enoch (Gen.5). They lived their lives in light of the unseen reality of God and His eternal kingdom.

“By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended to be righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for before he was taken up, he was commended to have been pleasing to God” (11:4,5).

Some have proposed that Abel’s offering was “better” than Cain’s because Abel brought an animal sacrifice while Cain brought a grain offering. This may be true; but later teaching indicates that grain offerings were acceptable to God (Leviticus 2, and we must note that the books of Genesis and Leviticus were written by Moses, thus the grain laws were in effect when Genesis 4 was first read and interpreted). It is certain that what made Abel’s offering acceptable was his *heart of faith* in bringing his offering to God, while Cain was just going through the motions of religious activity, without true faith – and this fits within the context of the book of Hebrews where those who have true faith are being contrasted with those who only have ‘professing faith.’ (See also 1John 3:12 on Cain’s attitude.)

We know little about Enoch other than the striking fact that he was “taken up” to God before his death (Gen.5:24). By faith he so lived in daily communion with God that God took him right up into His eternal kingdom even before his days on earth came to a biological end. (Bible trivia: Enoch and Elijah are the only two people in the Bible who never died.)

Next comes a brief, important statement as to the necessity of faith (“trust”) in God.

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He proves to be One who rewards those who seek Him” (11:6).

Why does faith please God? Because faith indicates that we trust God and want to honor Him. Faith is, thus, an expression of love.

Any parent is pleased when a child takes the parent at his/her word. Nothing could be more displeasing to a parent than having a child always doubt the parent’s word, and always run in the opposite direction of the parent’s instructions. Ultimately, faith (trust) is an expression of a relational connection of love. Thus, God is pleased when He sees that we, His children, take Him at His Word and bring our lives into subjection to His desires.

Examples of faith continue: Noah, Abraham and Sarah. Noah's faith was evidenced in the way that he built a huge boat over many years (scholars estimate anywhere from 50-120 years) even though there was no flood in sight. He built with eyes of faith because God promised him that someday there would be a catastrophic flood. His actions in the present were guided by what he believed to be true about the future. Noah had to live with people who mocked his faith in God. He pleaded with skeptics to turn to God in faith, but people ignored his message.

Abraham exercised faith when he followed God's command to leave the land of his ancestors (the thriving civilization of Ur) and travel to the land God was promising to him and his future descendants (Genesis 12). He knew nothing about the land of promise, or how God would bless him there; he only knew that it was GOD Who had called him into this journey of faith. Similarly, Abraham's wife, Sarah, had faith in God to follow her husband believing that God had a future for them. She further believed that God would give her a child according to His promise, even beyond the age of normal child-bearing. She had to wait in faith for 25 years for the promise of a son to be fulfilled.

A Parenthetical Comment about Faith: 11:13-16

This parenthesis is perhaps the most important part of this whole chapter on faith, for it explains the relationship between "faith" and actually "receiving what is promised."

"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen and welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed, if they had been thinking of that country which they left, 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 a city for them" (11:13-16).

With reference to God's eternal purposes and promises, these people "saw them and welcomed them (into their lives) from a distance... and they confessed" that they would live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven (a "heavenly country") while here on earth. Their lives in the present were guided by what they knew to be true about the future. They did not receive, in their earthly lifetime, the full

measure of what God promised to them, because they realized they were part of a grander story that God was working out for humanity (the kingdom of God). Abel's life was cut short when he was killed by his brother, Cain, yet he received an eternal reward because of his faith in God. Abraham and Sarah died without seeing the "great nation" that was to spring from their union, yet, that great nation arose over the centuries that followed. Moses never set foot in the "Promised Land," yet the nation he so faithfully led did inherit that land. (God's faithful love rewarded Moses by choosing him to "set foot" in the Promised Land at the Transfiguration of Jesus when he appeared with Elijah to meet with and strengthen Jesus before His suffering— Matt.17:1-5.) All of these people of faith trusted *the character of God and His eternal plans and purposes*. Regardless of how things played out during their time on earth, they kept their eyes on God and His heavenly kingdom. They lived in the present in light of the promises of the future. To borrow a phrase from Dr. Warren Wiersbe, these people "*lived in the future tense.*"

Notice the little phrase in the middle of this section: "*If they had been thinking of the country which they left, they would have had opportunity to return.*" These people of faith (like Abraham and Sarah), could have abandoned God's call on their lives and turned back to the land that they originally left when they first chose to follow God. Similarly, these Hebrews that the author is addressing were being tempted to turn back to their former lives, rather than continuing to follow Jesus and remain true to their confession of faith. Yet, if they were going to walk in the footsteps of these people of faith in ch.11, they would not turn back, rather, they would press on to pursue the plans and purposes of God, regardless of the outcome in their present experiences.

On the last night Jesus was with His disciples, He foretold that life would be full of trials and tribulations (John 16:33); but He also comforted them and told them to trust Him (John 14:1). Life will often be full of unexpected losses, disappointments, and at times tremendous pain. Yet, Jesus encourages us to grow in enduring faith and not to let go (even when we don't understand and don't think it's fair). What's your greatest challenge where you need to exercise persevering faith in God?

The writer now returns to the faith of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, whose stories occupy the bulk of the book of

Genesis (chapters 12-50). Although each faltered in many ways, they still performed acts of faith that demonstrated they were trying to walk in the plans and purposes of God and believe His promises.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and the one who had received the promises was offering up his only son; it was he to whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac your descendants shall be named.’ He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones” (11:17-22).

Abraham knew that God had promised to give him descendants through Isaac; thus, God would either have to spare Isaac from death OR raise him from the dead. One way or another, Abraham trusted that God would deliver on His promise; thus, he laid his one and only son of promise on the altar (see Genesis 22 for this amazing faith-story). Isaac, Jacob and Joseph all spoke words, at the time of their deaths, that showed they believed in the *future fulfillment* of God’s promises.

Next, the faith of Moses (and his family) is highlighted, as he stood with the people of God against the powerful forces of Egypt, ultimately leading the Exodus and the birth of the nation Israel. This is the longest story of faith in this chapter, thus indicating the importance of Moses, whom this Hebrew audience greatly respected.

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the temporary pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he persevered, as though seeing Him who is unseen. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned” (11:23-29).

Moses and his parents were “looking to the reward.” They did not live based on the payoffs in the present, rather, in light of the

promises of the future. The chapter concludes with many examples of persevering faith, from the time of Israel's conquest of Canaan (the book of Joshua), to the end of the time of the prophets. Notable here is the list of *the acts of faith* without names being attached (although an audience familiar with the O.T. story would have been able to attach names to many of these famous faith stories). We are reminded here that *true faith results in action*.

“who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mocking and flogging, and further, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented (people of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts, on mountains, and sheltering in caves and holes in the ground” (11:33-38).

Note in the above list that some of these people of faith experienced great victories in this life (11:32-35a), while others experienced humiliating suffering in this life (11:35b-38). The outcome was not the issue; rather, how they kept their eyes on God's eternal reward in the midst of victory or pain. The reference to someone being “sawn in two” comes from the apocryphal O.T. book “*The Martyrdom of Isaiah*,” a book that the Jews in Jesus day considered valuable, though not on the same level as the “inspired” writings of the O.T.

The summary at the end of the chapter reads very much like the interlude above (11:13-16) where it was emphasized that most of the people of faith in the O.T. period *did not live to see the ultimate fulfillment of the plans and purposes of God that were promised to them*. They exercised enduring faith regardless of how the circumstances of their individual lives played out.

“And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect” (11:39,40).

These verses teach us that people of faith who have lived before US, are tied to God's grand story and OUR earthly story. How they lived has impacted those who followed in their faithful footsteps, and down through the ages to us. Now we are admonished to leave footsteps of faith for those coming behind us. In 1988 a powerful song "Find Us Faithful" was recorded by Steve Green. It was based completely on Hebrews ch. 11. Read the lyrics at the end of these notes. Listen to the song on YouTube or other public internet sources.

Running the Race with Endurance: 12:1-13

Now the writer asks his audience to envision themselves in the Roman arena where the games are played. A great cloud of witnesses is in the seats watching the race, and the recipients of this letter are the runners in the contest.

"Therefore, since we also have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us rid ourselves of every obstacle and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:1-3).

Before running the race with endurance, the runner must remove every encumbrance. "The sin" which so easily entangles us is a reference to the "particular sin" that causes each individual to be hindered in his/her race. As we run, we fix our eyes on Jesus Who ran His race with endurance. Even Jesus models "faith" in the sense that He endured the pain of the present in light of the promise of the future (12:2). We run our race aware of all the great men and women of faith who have gone before us, including that special observer in the audience, JESUS, the author and perfecter of our faith.

- The Father will train us as we run. As we run, we will experience the training ("discipline") that the Father brings to us in order to grow and strengthen us. In this sense, divine discipline is not "judgment" from God, rather, it is the constructive training of a loving Father intended to help His true children run even faster and farther.

“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He corrects every son whom He accepts.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. For the moment, all discipline seems not to be pleasant, but painful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is impaired may not be dislocated, but rather be healed” (12:4-13).

The “discipline” these people were experiencing was directly related to the persecution that was causing some of them to back away from Jesus. *“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.”* They were experiencing pressure from the culture and the governing authorities; but the writer encourages them to *see this pressure from God’s perspective*. The final lines bring us back to the arena/race imagery. They are to strengthen those parts of their lives that are weak and feeble, so that they may run strong and finish well.

God the Father will discipline His children, even using painful ways, so that the peaceful fruit of righteousness will become more evident in our lives. Never mistake divine discipline (training) for “punishment.” God does not condemn, judge or punish His children; but He does lovingly develop and “grow” us, and He uses the circumstances of life to accomplish His work in us. So, when you encounter trials and difficulties, it is not useful to ask God, “Why?” Rather ask God, “What?”: “What are you seeking to develop in me through these circumstances?”

Looking out for One Another: 12:14-17

There are numerous places in Hebrews where we are called to encourage “one another” in our walks with God, particularly during times where faith is being tested. Here we come to another such admonition. We need one another to stand firm against testing.

“Pursue peace with all people, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that there be no sexually immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears” (12:14-17).

When trying to understand and interpret the difficult “warning passages” in Hebrews (eg. 6:4-8 and 10:26-31), it is helpful when we see an example from the Old Testament. While the issues were different between Esau and the current “Hebrew” audience, the principle was the same. Esau turned his back on his birthright as the firstborn son and treated it as worthless, selling it to his brother Jacob for a single meal (Genesis 25:29-34). He valued the pleasure of the moment over the promise of his future inheritance as the firstborn son. (Those who were abandoning their faith in Jesus were turning their back on Him in exchange for immediate protection from persecution.) Later, Esau realized what he had forfeited and tried to regain his inheritance; but it was impossible for him to regain what he had sold to his brother (Genesis 27:30-38). (Those who were running away from faith in Christ should not hope to be “*renewed again to repentance*” 6:4-6.) Esau exemplifies the opposite of enduring faith, in that he abandoned the promises of his future inheritance for the immediate payoff in the present.

Contrast between Mt. Sinai and the Heavenly City: 12:18-29

Hebrews is full of comparisons, in order to show the superiority of Jesus and the New Covenant that He mediates between God and humanity. Here we come to one final comparison between Mt. Sinai where the Law of Moses was given to Israel and “Zion” which here refers figuratively to the eternal “city” in heaven where God dwells. The Israelites were terrified when they saw and heard the power of God thunder from heaven on Mt. Sinai. How much more, then, should the present audience live with reverential fear of God Who has spoken once and for all in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, His Son.

“. . . you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of

Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking . . . Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (12:22-24,25,28,29).

Believers are here described as “*the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.*” Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation” and the “firstborn of those who are raised from the dead” (see Colossians 1:15-18). Believers are the “*church of the firstborn (Jesus)*” and their names are “*enrolled in heaven.*” Once in heaven, the “*spirits of righteous people are made perfect*” (no more sin). The point here is that we as believers are sharers in something so spectacular and so superior that we should not turn back to any other system or option offered to us.

Final Admonitions: 13:1-19

The main argument of the letter has now been completed. The author ends with a string of practical admonitions designed to guide life in the family of God, as people continue to exercise enduring faith *together*.

- Love the brothers and sisters (13:1).
- Show hospitality to strangers (13:2).
- Visit those in prison and/or persecuted (13:3).
- Live moral lives and honor sexuality in marriage (13:4).
- Avoid the love of money and practice contentment (13:5).
- Remember Jesus’ words “I will never leave you, nor will I ever forsake you” (13:5). (Ie: you are completely secure, never alone.)
- Trust God to be faithful to meet your needs (13:6).
- Honor and imitate those who have taught you the Word of God (13:7).
- Beware of varied and strange teachings (13:9).
- Be willing to share in the reproaches of Christ who suffered for us (13:10-14).
- Continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God (13:15).
- Do not neglect doing good deeds (13:16).
- Submit to the spiritual leaders God has given to you (13:17).
- Pray for the author and his companions (13:18,19).

Final Benediction: 13:20-25

“Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, that is, Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. But I urge

you, brothers and sisters, listen patiently to this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. Know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. Grace be with you all” (13:20-25).

FIND US FAITHFUL- Steve Green

*We're pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road,
And those who've gone before us line the way.
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary,
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace.
Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run the race
Not only for the prize, but as those who've gone before us,
Let us leave to those behind us, the heritage of faithfulness
Passed on through godly lives.*

*O may all who come behind us find us faithful,
May the fire of our devotion light their way.
May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe,
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
O may all who come behind us find us faithful.*

*After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone,
And our children sift through all we've left behind,
May the clues that they discover, and the mem'ries they uncover,
Become the light that leads them, to the road we each must find.*

Refrain...

Discussion Questions

1. Read Hebrews 11:1,6. How is 'Biblical Faith' described as this section begins? What does this chapter teach you about "faith?"
2. Many examples of persevering faith are given in ch.11. Which ones stick out most to you? Why? Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, etc.
3. Ch.11:29-39 describe many other faithful believers who are un-named. How do their lives challenge you?
4. Ch.12:1-3 challenge and inspire us. How?
5. Ch. 13 is full of admonitions. Which ones stand out for you?