

Reading: Hebrews 11

Theme: God's Portrait Gallery of Faith.

The Hebrew Christians were under tremendous pressure to give up their faith, to throw in the towel and go back to Judaism. They would have been reminded of all the rich history of the men and women of faith that were contained in their OT Scriptures. The writer encouraged these Hebrews to go on by showing that they too were to have the same kind of faith (10:39). OT and NT believers have the same one faith and hope and the writer links this altogether in this chapter and concludes **v39 & 40**. This is an amazing chapter and although we will go through it quickly using 8 headings – you would benefit from reading in more detail the OT accounts of the events mentioned – but we are just going to skim over them very quickly:

1. Faith - Undeniable Constituents (v1-2)

Some call v1 the definition of faith, but it doesn't mention all the aspects of faith in NT terms. So perhaps we have the undeniable constituent parts of *the nature of faith in action*. Yes, the object of faith is God, His promises and the eternal things that they encompass, but that has to be worked out in our lives and actions. It is the assurance, foundation and confidence of what we hope for and by that we see the invisible and from our innermost being we say that God is true. It is not a leap in the dark, or switching off our minds, but it is reasoning that as God is there and He has made promises, He will keep those promises and so we can trust in Him for everything. The OT heroes were commended for this and in fact they model it for us.

Do we have this faith? It is to be centred on God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and all that is promised to us in God's word. It may seem incredible, maybe we like to be those who believe what we can see, quantify and handle. Yet there is much in life we accept without seeing the things themselves e.g. radio waves, our

brains, the fantastic discoveries claimed by scientists concerning the universe and even the smallest parts of the atom.

2. Faith - Understanding Creation (v3)

Here is an important verse for Creationists and Evolutionists of various shades. No one witnessed the point of creation or the actual process claimed for evolution and *so both have faith* that they are right from things they did not see! Creation is presented in God's word as a fact of God's working which we have to grasp by faith. If God is the God which the Bible describes, then would it be impossible for Him to create all things as we are told in the book of Genesis? Personally I feel there is no problem with those accounts as God is presented as more than able to do that. The Bible declares that He created all things from nothing and brought and sustains all things together by the word of His power. If we limit God concerning what He is able to do, then how can we have full trust in Him to save our eternal soul which seems a far greater work than material creation? If we say that God is all powerful, but then limit Him in one of His glorious works, then we doubt He brought creation into being and how then is v3 true of us!

3. Faith - Unforgettable Characters (v4-12)

Here we have a list of OT believers, men and women, old and young, many weak and helpless from different stages in history. Yet they had faith and this faith pleased God and expected great things of God - both in time and especially in eternity. So Abel worshipped in a way that pleased God because he knew what God expected. Enoch in his life knew what pleased God and did it, and even though he lived in a corrupt generation, he still walked with God and trusted in Him all his life and then suddenly, there he was, gone! He did not die, but God took him straight to heaven. In our lives, worship and ongoing battle in a corrupt world, our faith is to show as we live to please God and live life with Him. We are to realise that fellowship with the living God will ultimately

triumph over death and we too will be in the wonders of heaven. As believers we are to walk by faith and not by sight and are to do that which pleases God; in NT terms we walk in the light. This is done to please Him because we believe He exists and we will have an eternal reward and also can experience many blessings in this life.

Noah lived in very difficult times too and yet he, in faith, also walked with God and did as God commanded. He was warned about things not yet seen and by faith he built the ark, condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. As incredible as it seemed, he trusted what the invisible God said about unbelievable events. God's promises for good and His warnings of judgement are all true and He will fulfil each and every one of them. Do we believe that? If so are we accepting His promises of salvation and fleeing the warnings of judgement to come?

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah are presented to us as those expected God to fulfil His promises for an inheritance, and they were all prepared to live in the Promised Land even though they weren't the possessors of it because they looked forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. We are to realise that faith hears God's call, obeys God's command, trusts God's providence and inherits God's promise. For us, we are to hear God's word, to respond in obedience to it, trust that God knows what He's doing in our lives even when His providences seem to go against His promises and we are to keep on doing so, in order to gain the fulfilment of those promises.

Sometimes God's promises are a long time coming, yet the patriarchs, trusted God and lived in the land of promise and even though God's promises were not immediately fulfilled, but they looked to God expectantly to fulfil His promises. This was true

concerning Abraham and Sarah having a child - when all seemed humanly impossible, when they could have given up hope so easily, they believed God's promises and their faith was not misplaced. They had Isaac and the line continued and became the great nation through whom the Saviour came. Faith is to cause patience in us - that we truly expect God to fulfil His word, plans and purposes and so we wait His time to fulfil His word and purposes in and for our lives.

4. Faith - Uncomplicated Confession (v13-16)

These ones mentioned in the previous verses had wonderful promises concerning the Promised Land, descendants without number and that their seed would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth. They didn't see these fulfilled with their own eyes, but they believed them - they only saw and welcomed them from a distance. Because of the promises and the faith they had in God it affected the way they lived on earth and their expectation was centred not on an earthly country, but a better one - the heavenly one. So they were pilgrims and strangers on earth.

They had a clear and uncomplicated confession of trust in and followed the Lord and did so with their eyes on heaven - all its wonders and glories that lay ahead of them which would eclipse any earthly fulfilment of the promises which had been made. Because of that, they did not look back with longing, but wanted to go on to their glorious heavenly home. As believers we can look around us and wish that we could have or do or be partakers of so much that the world offers us, but we are to realise what a glorious hope we have and so prepare ourselves for heaven and all its wonders. As we do so, even if we suffer hardships, this God is going to be our God and He will not be ashamed to be owned as such and He has prepared something far more wonderful than we could ever ask or think or imagine and it will make up many times over for any sufferings we've had in this life.

5. Faith - Underlying Context (v17-22)

The writer's argument is here set in the context of the faith of the patriarchs. God had promised that He would count the faith of Abraham as righteousness and Abraham's faith was further shown when that faith was tested when things **seemed to run contrary to God's promises and provision**. It was an incredible testing - to give up his one and only son; not only that, but he himself had to use the knife to kill his own son and as he did so he had to seemingly give up on the very promise that bound him to God and His provision. Yet the logic of faith reasoned that God was true and therefore He could raise the dead - something never previously recorded in Scripture and yet Abraham trusted God completely.

The faith of the patriarchs is highlighted not only when they were in their youth and vigour, but in old age, even on their deathbed and staring death in the face. Both Isaac and Jacob had an active and lively faith that looked to God's future promises. This is a challenge to all who are facing older age and even when our death seems closer than it has done previously! We are to be looking forward to what-will-be for us as believers and also encouraging others to look to what God can do for them in the future.

Added onto Isaac and Jacob's faith is the final example of dying faith which is centred on Joseph. He is the first human saviour of the people of Israel, he had experienced remarkable events throughout his life and as he was on his deathbed he remembered God's promise to his great-grandfather and knew that it would be kept - promised by God Himself to Abraham (*Genesis 15:13-14*) and so he gave instructions about his bones for the time when they would go back to the Promised Land. Our faith in God is to help us as we live life and all that it brings our way and especially it is to help us as we go into our last days and into death itself. Our

faith is to make such a difference in the way we live, think, desire and even as we face death, for we will remember what God has promised and that the best is still to come!

6. Faith - Uncompromising Choices (v23-29)

Here our attention is on another OT great - Moses. Moses had humble origins and yet active faith was evidenced in his slave parents, so even though it would mean death if discovered, they hid their baby boy and he was not thrown in the Nile. We know how Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter and grew up in the palace. Yet Moses reached the time where he had to make hard decisions and choices. All the wealth and the pleasures of Egypt were his as a royal prince, even the throne of Egypt could have been ahead for him. Yet he seemingly throws it all away and identified with a slave nation. In human terms he was a plonker, but he saw more than just those things. He saw the invisible! And this affected his choice **v25-26**. In the testing and tempting times of our lives we also need to be able to see Him who is invisible! We also are to focus on who God is and what He has said in His word and so get our priorities sorted even when tempted with pleasures and riches – whether we are young or older.

Moses' faith caused him to obey God even in the area of the Passover and the people of Israel were spared that night. It must have been incredible to obey God and to go forward into the Red Sea, trusting Him for this safety and deliverance. Moses said to the Israelites not to be afraid, but to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord and God would fight for them (*Exodus 14:13-14*). Moses' faith set an example for the people and they all walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. As we go forward in faith into our lives, God in His grace and providence can turn the things we dread, and appear as obstacles, into a pathway for our feet and a graveyard for our fears. Our faith is to affect our lives and our ongoing walk in obedience to God.

7. Faith - Unflinching Commitment (v30-38)

We are to recognise that having faith does not grant us immunity from struggles, suffering and even death. It is not that we have faith as an insurance policy, or a magic amulet to ward off all ill, pain, hardships and suffering. In this section we see other believers who were commended for their faith. Seven of them are named, but they're not elaborated on. We see both men and women in this list of commendation and of some it is noted that they did have successes, triumphs and were delivered from their ordeals, but it is noted that others were kept as they went through agonising torture and cruel martyrdom in a way that glorified God and witnessed to others. From the middle of v35-37 we have a sickening list of what some of these people of faith went through. We can read it and wonder if we would be able to stand as they stood. Yet if we are honest, don't we wonder if we could stand some of the trials which believers around us go through - their health, family situations, financial situations etc.

In v38 the writer states the world was not worthy of these ones and they lived as vagabonds, tramps in the deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground. Those who have faith in God do not have any guarantees that things will be easy for them. Yet in the trials and difficulties of life, no matter how severe, these ones kept on because they had this faith and trust in God and saw eternal invisible realities (*e.g. the resurrection*) and were enabled to keep on keeping on.

This gruesome section is a challenge to me and to my faith. We have it easy at the moment compared to what believers have been and are going through. Do we often take time out to focus and to look at the invisible realities that our faith guarantees? If we do so, we will find that more and more our hearts and desires would be centred on spiritual and heavenly matters and these things will put

our earthly trials and difficulties into focus. While our pain and hurt will truly be real, we will be the more able to deal with it as we will see that we can glorify our Saviour in such and that these are practical reminders that heaven is the only place where there will be no more suffering or pain or trials. Should we have to go through persecution and our enemies try to put us to shame and suffering, we are to recognise that as children of the King of heaven we too are part of those of whom the world is not worthy. So here on earth, we are to live as sons and daughters of the King to bring glory to Him in all we do and go through.

8. Faith - Unbeatable Conclusion (v39-40)

What faith is presented to us in this chapter! The OT greats are held up as examples of faith that overcomes both in life and death. What was the author's purpose in writing such things to these Hebrew Christians? These trailblazing OT believers did so waiting for the dawn of the new covenant in Christ before their expectations could be realised. They lived in the era of promise; while the Hebrew Christians and we live in the era, the time of fulfilment and these Hebrew believers and we had the privilege to be born, and born again, in such a time! They and we are so privileged. Can we see how little in terms of faith is being asked of us? The OT believers endured by seeing Him who is invisible, but as Hebrews 1 tells us, God's final revelation has been made in His Son. We have received something better, the clear gospel promise and hope that was unavailable to OT believers in such clarity. Yet the glory of the gospel is that reaches back and forward, and together with us they will be glorified and made perfect and we will all be there in the reality of heaven and delight in our God and our Saviour and all that He's done for us. What a hope to have. Do we have it? If so we are to rejoice and let it work out and show in our lives to God's glory.