

Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11 is a familiar chapter for many of us, and perhaps we think of it as a sort of 'roll call' of great saints of the Old Testament. Perhaps we may feel intimidated by it and think that we are no match at all for the ones whose great exploits of faith are catalogued here – ?

But, putting that to one side, we can see that the writer is simply following on from what he has written in **chapter 10**. He finished that chapter with encouragement to 'keep on keeping on' and not to throw away our confidence (**10:35**), contrasting faith with 'shrinking back'. Shrinking back leads to destruction (as he warned about earlier in **ch.10**) but faith leads to the keeping, preserving and possessing our souls – holding on to what is ours, our mind, will and emotions, the things that make us ourselves as individuals!

Contrasting faith with shrinking back gives us a good lead-in to this chapter. Every single one of these 'heroes of faith' always had the alternative option of shrinking back instead of stepping forward in response to what the LORD was saying to them. The 'confidence' of **10:35** is more like boldness and outspokenness. The Greek word means 'saying it all', and is used for example in **Acts 4:13, 29 & 31**.

... which brings us to **11:1**, that classic definition of faith: "the assurance/substance of things hoped for, the conviction/evidence of things not seen." The word translated 'assurance' or 'substance' is *hupostasis*, something which is placed under and supports. Perhaps 'foundation' might even be appropriate. It is also used in **Hebrews 1:3**, translated as 'nature'. Can you see the connection? (Look back at our notes from **Hebrews 1**!) And 'conviction' or 'evidence'? Built into this word *elegchos* is the idea of 'reproof' (e.g. **Matthew 18:15, Titus 1:9**). I get the feeling that real faith in unseen realities reproves and finds fault with the unbelief which insists that 'only seeing is believing'. There is definitely a battle going on here!

11:2 Literally, 'In this the elders received a testimony' – all the forefathers just about to be listed.

11:3 But, before that, creation itself! The worlds/ages were fashioned (= 'thoroughly prepared') by the spoken, 'topical', word of God (not *logos* here but *rhēma*).¹ Everything which can be seen was not generated out of anything visible. Einstein began to see the edge of this in 1915 ($E=mc^2$, mass and energy are interchangeable, his theory of relativity) and modern science is gradually catching up! (See **Hebrews 1:3** again, and **Colossians 1:17**.)

11:4 A little insight into **Genesis 4**! On the face of it, the acceptance of Abel's offering and the rejection of Cain's looks a bit unfair, doesn't it? But here we read that Abel offered his sacrifice through faith. Faith doesn't spring out of nowhere but is our response to God speaking to us (**Romans 10:17**). For Abel to have had faith, he must have heard from God – and obeyed. Cain either didn't hear what God said or disobeyed it, and so responded with his own ideas and his offering

¹ Compare 'the Word' – *logos* – in **John 1:1-5 & 14-18**.

was rejected. We are not specifically told that Abel's offering of the life of 'the firstlings of his flock' was looking forward to the sacrifices in the tabernacle and the temple or to the death of Jesus on the cross, but the connection seems significant. Were both Cain and Abel told the same thing – that a life needed to be given – but Cain thought he knew better? He evidently did not exercise faith, anyway!

11:5 We don't know much about Enoch, except that he 'walked with God' for 365 years (**Genesis 5:21-24**). That seems to have been enough for him to be pleasing to God, so pleasing that the LORD spared him the pain of death.

11:6 A short reminder: We can't please God without faith – responding to his word – and that means that we need to trust that he really does exist and that he rewards those who seek him out. This is not a casual interest in God but a very active 'pursuing'!

11:7 Noah – what an example! Quoted by the LORD himself as an outstandingly righteous man (alongside Daniel and Job, in **Ezekiel 14:14-20**). Talk about seeing the invisible! God warned him about impending judgment and he obeyed by building a massive ship, miles away from the sea. His faith, the writer says, 'condemned the world' (an example of the reproof of faith from **v. 1**), and he stepped into the inheritance of those who are counted righteous through faith not works!

11:8-12 Abraham and Sarah. Two more 'fools for God'! Abraham was told to leave and go to the place where God would give him an inheritance. He wasn't told where it was; he lived in tents with his descendants and never had a permanent home in the 'land of promise'; although God had told him that it was to be his inheritance, he lived there like a foreigner. Another insight from the writer: Abraham had his eyes on God's purpose – the establishing of 'the city which has foundations'. And Sarah – although she laughed when she heard the promise that she would have a child¹ – in the end, she trusted the LORD and was able to conceive. She 'considered him faithful who had promised'. Here was her real personal response to what the LORD had said.

Result? A new nation was generated who would be heirs of the promise.

11:13-16 This is what it means to trust God, not necessarily receiving the promised inheritance but seeing and welcoming it from a distance (the word means 'embracing' or 'enfolding in the arms'). Putting behind us where we came from, agreeing with God that we are 'strangers and exiles' here, and looking forward to 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one'.² Abraham and the others mentioned so far, all looking forward to promises which they had not yet received, yet all the time with the option to go back to where they came from – 'shrinking back' as in **10:39**. And, because of their continuing desire (literally, 'reaching out') for that better, heavenly country, God is not ashamed to be named as their God and has in fact already prepared a city for them (see **Revelation 21:10 onwards**).

¹ **Genesis 18:9-15**

² 'The Epistle to Diognetus' written in the 2nd Century AD casts some interesting light on this.

From **11:17** onwards, we come to the long list of those who ‘gained approval through their faith’. Let’s pick out a few pointers as we go, remembering that faith is something that starts with God himself: he doesn’t expect us to ‘have faith’ in a vacuum, but always gives us something to trust in, some way to exercise that trust . . .

Abraham had a direct promise that all his descendants would be named through Isaac (**Genesis 21:12**) and had already been told that the land would be given to him and his descendants (**Genesis 13:14-17**). Despite this, he was ready to sacrifice Isaac at the command of the LORD (**Genesis 22**), and the only piece of the land which he ever owned was the burial cave in Machpelah which he bought from Ephron the Hittite (**Genesis 23**). He certainly did not see his descendants occupying the Promised Land!

We are not told much about Isaac’s faith, but he blessed his son Jacob with a blessing which included “May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you” at a time when they were all still living a nomadic existence with no land of their own. His ‘blessing’ of Esau reads almost like a curse! (**Genesis 27**) In both cases, he spoke prophetically of future things as yet unknown and unseen, which we must conclude that the LORD had shown him.

Similarly, when Jacob comes to blessing his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, he speaks prophetically that the older one (Manasseh) will serve the younger one (Ephraim) and that Ephraim will multiply greatly – which, of course, happened, with the half-tribe of Ephraim becoming probably the chief tribe of the divided kingdom of Israel, more than 700 years later. And he makes a specific promise to Joseph that the LORD would bring them all in to the ‘land of your fathers’ (**Genesis 48**). More promises and prophetic insights for the other 11 brothers in **Genesis 49**!

Joseph himself, still in Egypt aged 110, again spoke prophetically (**Genesis 50**) of the forthcoming exodus (nearly 400 years later), when Moses took Joseph’s bones with them as they left (**Exodus 13:19**). Those bones were eventually buried at Shechem around the same time as Joshua died, about another 50 years later! (**Joshua 24:32**)

Moses’ parents also exercised faith by hiding him at home for 3 months before putting him in a basket by the river, where Pharaoh’s daughter found him and raised him as her own son (**Exodus 2**). What we tend to forget is that she employed Moses’ real mother as his nurse (thanks to Miriam’s ingenuity), so he will have grown up knowing very well that he was **actually** a Hebrew and not an Egyptian! That will have motivated him to go and see how the other Hebrews were getting on (**Exodus 2:11**), which triggered his hasty escape from Pharaoh’s retribution and his time in the wilderness. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews records this episode as Moses’ **faith** (!), refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.

When Moses returned and was identified again with his own people, he ‘endured ill-treatment’ with them when Pharaoh forced the Hebrews to more and more work with fewer and fewer resources, and it says that Moses ‘considered the reproach

of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward'¹. Wow! I can't think of an earlier reference to the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, but perhaps we can get a little taste of Moses' faith as he delivers the message which the LORD gives him to pass to his people in **Exodus 6:1-9**.

V.27 just throws in another little reminder: '... as seeing him who is unseen.' The LORD, his promises and instructions, was more important to Moses than the fury of Pharaoh.

The list goes on, and we can trace each one who is recorded here and see the way in which they each **responded** to what the LORD initiated . . .

Amongst all the **people** listed here, there is one **place**, Jericho. A lot of collective faith here, as the Hebrew army marched around the walls for 6 days, apparently doing and achieving nothing, but doing what the LORD had told them to do. It had all started with **Joshua 6:2**, where we read 'The LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand . . ." ' Joshua couldn't see anything of the sort, just a strong and fortified city which the Hebrew army could not possibly conquer. But he obeyed, believing what the LORD had told him.

Back in **Joshua 2**, we read about Rahab there in Jericho, but can easily forget that she too exercised faith. See **Joshua 2:9-14**. She had heard about how the LORD had led the Hebrews all the way from Egypt (more than 40 years earlier!) and had given them more recent victories. In her own way, she trusted the LORD and sheltered the two spies.

Like the writer of this book, we can say 'time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets . . . ' But you may like to look up some of these yourself and see how real faith – responding to what God says – was operational in their lives.

Perhaps the most staggering thing about this whole chapter is the last two verses. None of these champions, despite giving such amazing witness to their faith, received the promise, 'because God had provided (= 'seen beforehand') something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect (= 'reach the goal').'

Let's not forget that this chapter does not stand on its own. It is, in effect, simply an exposition of what faith means, in the light of the end of **Hebrews 10** and leading into **Hebrews 12**, where the writer applies the reality of that faith to our own running 'with endurance the race that is set before us' (**Hebrews 12:1**).

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¹ The word 'reward' here is linked to 'rewarder' in **11:6**.