

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above all Things
Enter the Gallery: An Overview
Hebrews 11

Text:

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² 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.

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

²³ 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. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ 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— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Introduction:

We finally make it to the very familiar and well-loved chapter 11 of Hebrews today – “The Hall of Faith,” or “Faith’s Hall of Fame,” as it has appropriately been called. Perhaps a more textually accurate description is to be offered – “Men and Women of whom the world was not worthy” (See 11:38).

I know that most of you are familiar with chapter 11 and with the OT historical backgrounds behind most of the characters here mentioned. But what I must do for you is to show you how chapter 11 fits in the context and enhances the author’s flow of thought. There are many connectors that link chapter 11 with chapter 10. Let’s examine a couple:

First, look at 10:22, “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...” Do you see the phrase “full assurance of faith”? Notice how that phrase ties in with 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for...” There is one connection.

Stay in 10:22 and notice the phrase, “Let us draw near to God...” and see the connection in 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God...” That is the exact same word as in 10:22. Somehow, Hebrews 11 is going to connect to chapter 10 in helping us draw near to God.

The obvious connections come at the end of chapter 10. Especially noteworthy is the theme of endurance – a persevering faith that does not throw out one’s confession of hope. Enduring to the end holds forth a reward. Notice v. 35: “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” Compare that reward with what is coming in 11:6: “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.”

Two more links come in 10:38: “But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” First, there is the idea of God having pleasure in his righteous ones. That idea will be developed throughout the chapter as the author will speak of God’s pleasure in his people in terms of commendation. See it in 11:2: “For by it the people of old received their commendation.” Again in 11:4: “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.”

The theme throughout chapter 10 was this need for an enduring faith! “You and I need a faith that won’t quit – a faith that continues to persevere through thick and thin because the coming one is coming and we want him to find pleasure in us. For in those with whom he is pleased, he will come with the promised reward!

And yet this message is nothing new to the book of Hebrews. Not only has the author already stated this exact theme, but he has also already hinted at how he is going to get his hearers to persevere. Go with me back to chapter 6.

Hebrews 6:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹ And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

One way to keep persevering is to consider the lives of those who have fought valiantly to the end. In other words, there is a place for heroes and role models. Go to chapter 13.

Hebrews 13:7 (ESV)

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Perhaps we could draw a distinction between heroes and mentors. The author of Hebrews challenges you and I to consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. I find it helpful to make my heroes dead men. The outcome of their faith is clear. Men who are still living are my mentors but not yet my heroes. [That was for free]

But you see his plan of attack here? He’s calling us to a persevering, enduring faith that won’t quit. And the way he is going to encourage us toward such faith is my drawing our attention to some valiant warriors of the faith.

Listen here! George Guthrie, in his commentary on Hebrews properly points out, “As the author of Hebrews showcases spiritual luminaries marched before us across the stage of history, there exist dangers for us as contemporary readers.” He calls these dangers, “pitfalls.”

Pitfall #1: “I’m no hero!”

“These people are different from us,” we reason. “After all, they are in the Bible. I am not. So of course they were able to act valiantly in relation to the unseen God and in response to the hostile world.” We, on the other hand, are far too normal for living such extraordinary lives.

But if this is our perspective, we miss the whole point. The perseverance of faith through trials and hardships is the normal faith for all true Christians. This is, as C.S. Lewis would call it, “Mere Christianity.” The author of Hebrews whole desire is to call weak, struggling, sometimes stumbling Christians to live boldly by faith. That means he is calling us – you and me – with all of our habits and hang-ups, warts and weaknesses – to action. We are called to break out of step with the world, hop up on the stage of history, and take our place in God’s roll call of the faithful. Of course we are inadequate; of course we struggle with sin and temptation; of course we are vulnerable; but so have been all others who have evidenced the supernatural grace of God that enable us to live boldly by faith.

Remember Noah’s warts? Remember Abraham’s vulnerabilities? Remember Sarah’s doubts? Of course you remember! They were normal humans empowered by God to live boldly by faith. That is what makes grace amazing grace.

Pitfall #2: Misconceptions of faith.

The word “faith” is used in many different ways today. If we are going to hear the message of Hebrews 11, we must clearly understand the true nature of biblical faith. Hebrews 11 does not use the word “faith” in the following ways:

1. Faith as synonymous with world’s religions: This might best be characterized by the common question at work, “What faith are you?” The answer could come back with anything from Christian faith to Islamic faith. “Faith” means nothing more than religion.
2. Faith as a life of deep reflective devotion: “She is a person of deep faith.” But here again, such faith could be used of any god one follows, whether of Buddha, Krishna or Christ. Here, “faith” means spirituality. “She is a deeply spiritual person.”
3. Faith as faith in God’s goodness to me: That is faith can only produce good for me. This is the name-it-and-claim-it faith. Such faith is the far removed from the faith that is envisioned in ch 11 – faith that came to people as they were sawn in two, stoned and killed with the sword. The health, wealth and prosperity crowd could not envision that being sawn in two can be a life of faith, only a life of ease, comfort and bounty.
4. Faith as leap-of-faith: “You’ve just got to have faith.” This misconception arises even within the true church. Such thinking assumes that faith is always blind. Faith is not blind. While it is true that Hebrews 11 speaks of faith as being the assurance of things hoped for and the evidence of things *not seen*, it is not to be thought of as speaking of a blind leap into the unknown. For even though God may call you to leave your Ur of the Chaldeas to go to some unknown distant land (cf. v.8), there is still plenty of assurance and plenty of evidence based on what you do know, namely that God has called you to the move and that he is with you each step of the way. So this notion that you have to act contrary to what you do know and just trust that things are going to turn out the way you want them is unfamiliar to the Bible’s use of faith. Faith is always acting in accord with what you do know even though you may not know all that you want to know right now!
5. Faith as creed: Now this is a biblical use of the word “faith” (cf. Gal. 1.23; 1 Tim. 4.1, 6; Jude 3), but not the way it will be used in ch.11. Usually faith is the activity that springs from a certain set of beliefs. You are not necessarily a person who lives by faith simply because you

give mental assent to the right doctrine. If that doctrine is not causing you to act in accord with truth, your faith is dead (cf. James 2.14-26).

The Nature of Faith from Hebrews 11

Here, then, is where we really get into the nature of faith as used in this chapter. The author is going to portray in the lives of God's faithful through the ages that...

1. Faith involves confident action.

Most of the examples in ch.11 involve a person acting in confidence in accordance with what God says.

By faith Abel offered...Noah built...Abraham left...Isaac blessed...And the list could go on with action words. But notice the concluding section of the chapter where one action word after another is peeled off in rapid-fire succession:

Hebrews 11:32-34 (ESV)

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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.

Faith acts out of a bold confidence. Faith produces Christians who live boldly by faith.

2. True faith is action taken in response to the unseen God and his promises.

Faith spurs on to act in accordance with God's truth. These faithful men and women move forward in bold faith with eyebrow-raising tenacity without any perceptible reason for doing so – except that God had spoken!

Read v.8, 11, 17

3. Faith involves God's working supernaturally in the lives of natural people.

As I have already alluded, these people were quite natural people. Noah got drunk, Abraham was a liar, Sarah arranged for her husband to have a concubine, Jacob was a deceiver, Moses a murderer, and David an adulterer.

All of their heroics were supernaturally brought about by the grace of God. These examples are not a stretch, they present a principle: Real faith must be lived out in the lives of real people who are real pilgrims on a journey to a real heavenly city. There will be pitfalls and pain, deceivers and detours, but real faith boldly perseveres! They are people who are searching! They have not arrived. They are heroes not because they were perfect, but because they trusted God as he worked in them and through them in bringing about his perfect work.

You and I are perfect candidates for such a list. Will we trust God to have his way with us?

4. Faith works in a variety of situations.

We have an offering, a transport into heaven, the building of a boat, the moving of a family, the opening of a barren womb, the almost-sacrifice of a son, seeing into the future, suffering mistreatment for the cause of God, persecution and murder and so on the list could go. Faith works in a variety of situations, each one different.

5. Faith brings a variety of results.

Notice that sometimes faith brought “positive” results. The nation of Israel escaped Egypt, had their enemies defeated at Jericho when the walls fell, widows received their dead sons back to life, and a barren womb was opened.

But some of the results were “delayed” and even “negative.” Abel, though he offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain – and although he did it boldly by faith, he still got murdered. [How does that fit the health, wealth and prosperity doctrine?] Abraham had to wait years for the son of promise. And at the same time, v.13 says he died in faith having not received the promise.

Living boldly by faith may mean being tortured, mocked, beaten, imprisoned, destitute, stoned, and even mutilated by being sawn in two. [There is some historical evidence outside the Bible that indicates that Isaiah the prophet was placed by Judah’s king Manassah inside a hollow tree and cut in two.]

Do you understand what this means? That if the quest for your joy is found ultimately in Christ, and if that quest is fueled by a bold faith, then the pursuit of your joy by faith might cost you your life. It has for tens of thousands of heroes before us.

What if God called you to leave home and go to Cambodia to tell thousands of Christ-haters that he loves them. Do you know what they are doing to Christians there? They are peeling the skin and hair off of the faces of Christians while they are alive. And we could talk about Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Tibet, the Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, et. al.

You see, “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay...” (10.35-37).

It’s just that the reward is not in this life! And any good that may come to you in this life can not compare to the ultimate reward coming in Christ.

6. Faith is rewarded by God.

God’s true pilgrims look beyond the immediate to grasp the significance of the ultimate. And all sin and all temptation is nothing more than the attempt to get God’s pilgrim’s to sacrifice the ultimate on the altar of the immediate.

Don’t cave-in to such pressure and don’t sell-out to any lesser pleasure! Endure!

We will get to it later, but the reward that comes to those who draw near to God by faith is the reward of his commendation. It looks something like this – When the coming one comes (when Christ returns), he will gather all the nations before him. He will judge them according to what they have done – according to their actions. Will your actions demonstrate that you have lived life boldly by faith in trusting God’s words, commands and promises? Or will your life demonstrate that you have rejected God in the hopes that some other path would satisfy?

To those on his right, he will say, “I take pleasure in you because you had pleasure in me! Eternal life with me is your reward!”

To those on his left, he will say, “Because you shrank back and pursued another, my soul has no pleasure in you. Eternal destruction is your reward!”

Oh, Christian, there is reward coming – Christ is coming. Find pleasure in him and be satisfied today! Don’t stop trusting!

Conclusion:

Let's put it all together:

The kind of faith that characterizes the faithful men and women of God of whom the world is not worthy is a confidence that results in action carried out in a variety of situations by ordinary people in response to the unseen God and his promises, with various earthly outcomes but always receiving the reward of God's commendation.

Is your life all about the comforts and pleasures of the here and now?

If it is, you will not and cannot be a faithful Christian who lives life boldly by faith.