

“By Faith”

The Sixteenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 11:1-7; Genesis 6:13-22

Faith is one of those words Christians often use without definition. Since faith is a biblical word, “faith” has the connotation of being a good thing, and therefore something everyone should have. But this is completely wide of the mark. The word “faith” has very a technical meaning in the New Testament. Faith is not some generic term for whatever subjective opinion people may or may not have about God. Faith is used either as a verb (“to believe”) or as a noun (“faith”), and is always tied to its object (what is believed). The author of Hebrews carefully defines the term “faith” and then illustrates that definition by describing how the great figures from the Old Testament (Noah, Moses, Abraham, etc.) believed in God’s promise—the same promise which the author of Hebrews has argued was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Old Testament saints mentioned in Hebrews 11 serve primarily as witnesses to God’s faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises, and only secondarily as examples to us of people who have faith in God’s promise during difficult times.

We now move into a new (and perhaps the best known) section of Hebrews, chapter 11. Often described as the “hall of faith” because so many Old Testament luminaries are mentioned here, all of those who make the author’s list are included here because they believed the gracious covenant promise which God made to his redeemed people—“I will be your God and you will be my people.” There is much here in this chapter—the nature and character of faith, as well as a discussion of how the New Testament writers (such as the author of Hebrews) read the Old Testament. So, we will take our time going through it

Many of those who preach through this particular section of Hebrews emphasize the exemplary character of the faith of those who make the list. In taking this approach, the focus falls upon the example these people set for us, and which we should follow. This approach emphasizes that these were great men, they had faith in YHWH during the most difficult of times, so we should imitate them by striving to have the same kind of faith they had. But the obvious problem with this approach is that one of those mentioned, Rahab, was a prostitute. All those mentioned were sinful individuals, and those who lived during the time of the Judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah) were all men whose behavior was less than exemplary. Nevertheless, these people are numbered among those who had faith in the promise.

Given the fact that these biblical examples are better understood as repentant sinners, justified before God through their faith in that gracious covenant promise God made to his people, I’m going to take a different tact as we go through this passage in the coming weeks. As I see it, the emphasis in this chapter falls squarely upon God’s faithfulness in keeping his promise. All of those mentioned in this chapter trusted in the same thing—God’s covenant promise to provide redemption for his people. All of these people had faith—granted. The author says that repeatedly. But to what object was their faith directed? In what did they trust? Or better, in whom did they trust? All of those listed here in Hebrews 11 believed that God would keep his promise, making the object of faith—God’s promise—the central theme of the chapter, and not the presence of “faith” in the hearts and minds of those mentioned.

When interpreted in this manner, chapter 11 of Hebrews serves the author’s larger purpose of proving the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, the priests of Israel, the tabernacle and the temple, and even angels. The author is not merely saying to those considering returning to Judaism, “imitate” the faith of your fathers. Rather he is saying “your fathers all trusted the one covenant promise, and that covenant promise (the new covenant) is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.” The emphasis is not merely that these people had

faith, but that they had faith in the same object—the gracious covenant promise of God, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

If the author can demonstrate that throughout the history of redemption there has always been the one covenant promise given to sinners—the same gracious promise which the author has spent 10 chapters spelling out, including the fact that it is already fulfilled in Jesus Christ—then his point is that all of the great figures of the Old Testament believed in the same God (and his eternal son Jesus Christ) and the same gospel (grounded in the priestly work of Jesus Christ). Once this point is established, the author has added yet another important piece to his overall case for the superiority of the new covenant to the old.

When addressing the relationship between the old covenant era in redemptive history and the new (the time from Moses to the coming of Jesus), both Paul and the author of Hebrews contend that there has always been only one gospel, but only one gospel. Since the author of Hebrews has been arguing that the gospel is grounded in God’s sworn oath, and that the covenant promise is ultimately fulfilled through the priestly work of Jesus Christ, then it becomes clear that Jesus is that one foretold throughout the Old Testament. This proves Jesus’ superiority to Moses, Israel’s priests, and to angels.

The critical thing which has changed from the Old Testament era to the New (note—this includes the whole of redemptive history—even preceding the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai), is that in the New Testament the object of faith—the person and work of Jesus Christ—is much clearer than it had been in the Old. Jesus has already accomplished those things which God promised to give his people under the covenant of grace. And so those whose names appear in the author’s catalogue of those who had faith, are people who trusted in God’s covenant promise when it was still hidden in the form of type and shadow. But the substance of the promise is the same from them as it is for us. They looked forward to that day when the promised *will be* fulfilled, we look back to when it *was* fulfilled.

Since chapter 11 of Hebrews is forty verses long and includes most of the Old Testament luminaries, the best way to handle this chapter is to break it down into sections corresponding to the particular era in redemptive history in which the people mentioned lived. We will tackle the author’s discussion of the nature and character of faith (in verses 1-3), before we then turn to the first three people mentioned in the catalogue—those who believed the promise (Abel, Enoch, and Noah) all of whom lived before the flood (the pre-diluvian era).

The first issue to be addressed is “what is faith?” So, let us begin by taking up the first three verses of Hebrews 11.

It is remarkable to consider that the preceding verse (Hebrews 10:39) is an emphatic personal word of encouragement from the author to this congregation. “*But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*” Then, in chapter 12:1, the author opens with an exhortation which flows quite naturally from the words which end chapter 10: “*let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*”¹ It is important to notice that the author does not move directly from his word of encouragement (10:39) to the exhortation (12:1) without first taking the time to explain the nature and character of faith (11:1-3). This explanation of faith includes setting out the well-known catalogue of witnesses to God’s faithfulness in keeping his promise. This is a strong indication that it is a proper understanding of faith, and a proper understanding the nature of God’s promise, which will enable God’s people to obey the author’s exhortation in chapter 12. Faith always precedes good works.

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 276.

In verse 1 of chapter 11, the author defines faith as follows: “*now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Paul most often speaks of faith as the act of looking to Jesus Christ to save (i.e., trust)—hence justification through faith. But Paul can also speak of faith as that which looks beyond this world to eternal things—things which are real, but not visible to us.² This is Paul’s meaning in 2 Corinthians 5:7, when he writes “*for we walk by faith, not by sight.*” And this is in line with the way the author of Hebrews associates faith with hope, specifically faith (or trust) that God will keep his covenant promise—just as he did with all who are mentioned in this passage.

In Hebrews 1:3, the author described Jesus as “*the exact imprint of [God’s] nature*”—“nature” being the Greek word *hypostasis*. In Hebrews 3:14, the same word is used when the author speaks of the believer’s confidence. This is the meaning it has here in verse 1 of chapter 11, and “assurance” is a very apt translation. This fits with Paul’s point in Romans 8:24-25. “*For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we await for it with patience.*”³ Therefore, faith is that which looks to the promises of God, believing that God will bring them to pass. Biblically understood, faith corresponds very closely to the word “trust.” Faith, in this sense, is equivalent to saying, “Jesus will save me from my sins.” Or that “Jesus will raise me from the dead on the last day.” Faith accepts what is promised as though it were already a reality.

Another word used by the author in verse 1 of Hebrews 11 is the term “conviction” (*elenchos*) which indicates that as our eyes see physical objects, so our faith grasps the reality of things not seen. In fact, the author will speak this way of Moses in Hebrews 11:27 when he writes, “*By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him [YHWH] who is invisible.*” Based on what we know (and can see and understand) we believe (i.e., we have faith) that there is a spiritual (and invisible) reality beyond our sight. As did Moses, we trust that God is always with us although we cannot see him. This is yet another way to describe or define faith.

This is how the Old Testament saints are described by the author as they respond to God’s covenant promises at various points throughout redemptive history. According to verse 2, “*for by it [faith] the people of old received their commendation.*” The people of old (those listed in the catalogue of those who believed the promise) not only believed that God would do exactly as he has promised to do, they also looked beyond what they could see and experience to spiritual realities, that is, to things which are real, but which we cannot see (i.e., the invisible, beings like angels, etc.). They also believed that what God promised to do, he would in fact actually do.

Now that Jesus Christ has come and accomplished his priestly work, in human history, once and for all, on the cross and then in the heavenly temple, looking back, we see that those Old Testament saints mentioned here believed God’s promise hundreds of years before he fulfilled it. Because of this faith, these Old Testament believers now are held out to the author’s readers as those who by faith trusted in God’s promise, and who have now received everything God had promised to them. Their faith was not mere credulity or speculation, but they trusted God to do as he promised. And he did. And this is why we are to trust him. His track record in keeping his promises is very good.

The example set by these Old Testament saints should not be taken to mean that we should have faith merely because these people did. Rather, from the perspective of New Testament hindsight, as we witness

² Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 22-23.

³ Bruce, Hebrews, 277.

God's faithfulness in keeping his covenant promise to everyone mentioned in this catalogue, we know that God will give to us everything he has promised. If we trust the same God they did, and believe God's covenant promise as they did, as these promises are now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, so too we will be beneficiaries of God's faithfulness.

By faith, we will receive all the riches and treasures that are ours in Christ Jesus, just as the Old Testament saints already have. In other words, the object of faith (the person and work of Jesus Christ, who fulfills all of God's promises) ensures that what is promised is received. What matters, then, is not merely the presence of "faith" in and of itself without an object, but the object of faith. To whom or what does our faith look? Therefore, it is the object of faith—the person and work of Jesus Christ—who saves us from the guilt and power of our sin. Faith does not save. Jesus saves through faith.

In verse 3, the author of Hebrews makes his case that it is by faith that we grasp the origin of the universe. He writes, "*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.*" God spoke and it was so. Now, we were not there to see the world come into being, nor did we hear God speak the words "let there be." By faith we understand, as the author says, that God's power is sufficient to bring the entire universe into being, simply because he is the all-powerful (omnipotent) God who spoke and it was so.

It is from texts like Hebrews 11:3 that Christians developed the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (from nothing). The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is one of the most important ways in which Christianity is distinct from all pagan religions. Hence the creed—"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." There was no eternal pre-existing matter, no pre-existing immortals souls, no eternal forms (as taught by Plato). Before time and matter itself there was only the triune God, self-existent, and without need of the created order, as though God depended upon some thing outside himself. By faith, we believe that God spoke and thereby created the universe. He created the universe out of nothing, by simply speaking the universe into existence.

In verses 4-7, the author now takes up the first three historical figures in his catalogue of those believed God's covenant promise. These first three individuals, Abel, Enoch, and Noah, lived before the flood, well before the time of Abraham or the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai (the old covenant). Yet they still believed God's gracious covenant promise—"I will be your God and you will be my people."

In verse 4, the author turns his focus to Abel (son of Adam and Eve, along with Cain), writing "*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.*" The account of Abel (and his brother Cain) is found in Genesis 4:3-10, and reads as follows: "*In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.'* Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'"

As the author of Hebrews interprets Genesis 4, it is clear that Abel believed God's promise to save Adam's

fallen children because “the Lord had regard for [Abel]” (v. 7). Abel’s offering was accepted because he was already reckoned as righteous by God (through which he was “commended as righteous”). God’s prior regard for Abel then, is the basis for Abel’s faith and his acceptable offering which was given from a grateful heart. Although Abel was the victim of his brother’s jealousy, Abel still speaks to God’s people from the grave because the account in Genesis 4 reveals that from the very dawn of human history, we have the account of a justified sinner (someone for whom the Lord had regard) who brought an offering to God which reflects his faith in the promise—the firstborn from his own flock. This not only shows us the gravity of human sin (sacrifices must be offered to turn aside God’s wrath and anger), it also points us to the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ which the sacrificial death of Abel’s firstborn animal foreshadowed. By faith, Abel offered the appropriate sacrifice. Abel believed God’s promise. But Cain who did not believe brought an okra salad.

The second figure who appears in the author of Hebrews’s catalogue of those who believed the promise is Enoch, who is mentioned in Genesis 4:24. *“Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.”* That is, God took Enoch to himself before he died. In verse 5 of Hebrews 11, the author recounts the story of Enoch as follows: *“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.”* Enoch too believed God’s promise, and as the Hebrew text tells us, he “walked with God” (the LXX which the author of Hebrews cites translates this as “he pleased God”). Like anyone else whom the biblical account describes as a “righteous,” “upright,” “obedient,” or as doing something which “pleased God,” the only reason that their conduct can be described in this sense is because they, like Enoch, believed God’s promise, and then obeyed because of a grateful heart. Faith in the promise is a response to God’s grace. And faith in the promise produces good works. Enoch and Elijah are the only two figures in all the Bible who do not die, but are taken to heaven without experiencing death.

At this point (verse 6), the author digresses a bit to once again take up the subject of the nature of faith. He writes, *“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.”* When the author speaks of faith here, it is important to understand that he is not saying that it is faith which pleases God. Rather, apart from faith nothing we do pleases God. This establishes why Abel and Enoch were obedient and found favor with God—they already had exercised faith in the promise which God had made to them—a promise which at this point in redemptive history involved believing the words of Genesis 3:15: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”* These men believed that some how and in some way God will save them from their sins. Because they believed this, they lived in obedience.

Furthermore, as the author says, faith believes that the invisible God is, and that he keeps his promises. Here again, it is not the presence of faith which matters, but when biblically considered, what matters is the object of faith—most often defined as trust in the person and work of Christ to save us from our sins, and here as trust that God will keep his covenant promise (which he has in and through the priestly work of Jesus Christ). What God has promised is real, even though it is as of yet, unseen or unrealized.

In verse 7, the author takes up the story of Noah, the third and last of the pre-diluvian figures. *“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.”* The focus in Hebrews 11:7 is that Noah believed God’s warning about things unseen—specifically the warning that God was about to judge the world—events recorded in Genesis 6:13-22, our Old Testament lesson.

Like Abel and Enoch before him, Noah too was a righteous man, having been reckoned righteous through faith. This is borne out by the fact that the author of Hebrews explicitly says that Noah was an “*heir of the righteousness which comes by faith.*” This means that Noah was justified through faith, because he trusted in God’s promise to deliver him and his family. And so when God appeared to him and warned him of what was to come, Noah took God at his word. Noah believed that God would do exactly as he said he would do. The earth’s inhabitants of that time had never seen, nor experienced such a horrific deluge as that which would soon bring destruction upon the whole earth. Nevertheless, Noah trusted that the flood of judgment was about to come, and because he did, he set out to build the ark as commanded by God and save his family, as recounted in Genesis 6. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Noah looked like a fool. But his actions served to condemn the world, since his contemporaries were completely unprepared and perished when judgment finally came. Thus by faith, Noah was an heir of righteousness.

What, then, do we take with us from this first portion of the catalogue of those Old Testament saints who have believed God’s promise?

It is vital that we grasp the fact that what matters here is not the presence of faith—especially when it is conceived as some sort of ill-defined or irrational feeling, unfounded belief, personal opinion, or human desire or whim. What matters in Hebrews 11 is that we understand faith as our response to God’s prior promise made to us that he will save us from our sins through the death and righteousness of Jesus Christ. In its biblically usage, faith is not some undefined subjective feeling. It is not mere opinion or a blind leap in the dark. Rather, faith is a very technical and precise term meaning simply that when God speaks and makes a promise (that he will saves us from our sins), do we take him at his word and believe the promise to be true? If we trust God’s promise, then we have faith and are justified, biblically understood.

Unlike those in the pre-diluvian era who only had limited types and shadows (although God revealed himself to these people in direct ways), we have a much more clearly defined object of our faith. We know much more about redemptive history and God’s purposes than they did. In setting out this catalogue of Old Testament saints who believed God’s promise, the author of Hebrews is doing his best to show us how and why Jesus is the only proper object of our faith. As we read through this catalogue we witness God’s faithfulness to his people and learn more about God’s covenant promises. Therefore, we have good reason to believe God when he makes promises. The author has just set an entire catalogue before us of people who believed. We believe the same basic covenant promise they did, only the object of our faith (Jesus) is not hidden in type and shadow. His death and resurrection were very public and historical events.

Therefore, faith, simply defined, is our act of trusting God when he promises to save us from our sins. Based upon what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, do we believe (trust) that Jesus can and will save us? This means that it is not the intensity or strength of our faith which saves us (recall that Jesus said that even faith as small and puny as a mustard seed was sufficient to justify), but the object of faith who saves us in spite of ourselves.

We may have weak faith, but we have a strong savior. We may waver and doubt, but God is faithful and always keeps his promises. We may be sinful and wretched, but Jesus Christ is a great high priest who sympathizes with all our weaknesses and has already secured for us an eternal redemption. So, when we look back at redemptive history, and especially to the cross and empty tomb of Jesus, there can be no other response that to trust God and embrace all of his covenant promises and in his son Jesus, “by faith.”