



# CHARACTER

Bible Studies on Hebrews 11-12

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# INTRODUCTION

The eleventh chapter of the biblical letter to the Hebrew Christians is a study in the awesome faith of their Old Testament heroes. These were men and women—some famous, some obscure—who possessed true character. They were not just characters, they had character. Faith was at the heart of their nature, but it blossomed in so many fruitful directions. We study that portion of Scripture today in the hope that we might emulate their character.

This series of lessons will mine the riches of Hebrews 11 to magnify the character of faith in these people, for “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (1). If, by it, the elders obtained a good testimony, we will likewise.

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## *Lesson 1: Character*

In the 1990s, America was busy electing officials with a promise to fatten our pocketbooks in spite of the skeletons in their closets. The news media reminded us that character doesn't matter and we lived to learn better. Disgrace, sexual perversion and international humiliation became standard recompense for inviting men and women without character into our halls of honor.

Although a chaste and pious character is something ridiculed and lamented throughout Europe and even in liberal bastions of America, our national mindset continues to pledge some loyalty to the concept of character in the people who will lead us. Secularists will define character in a way that leaves no room for religious morality, but Christians will yearn for a type of character that finds its parameters in God's word.

Hebrews chapter 11 contains a list of Bible people who accomplished great things because of their faith. Some of them were lifelong servants of Jehovah, who seemed never to waver in their devotion. Others were practically rogues, but came to their senses and allowed faith to flow through them powerfully and magnificently in the end. Inclusion in this list does not imply that everything the person ever did on the Bible stage should be imitated. Rahab's harlotry, David's adultery, Samson's philandering and Noah's drunkenness were all painful lessons along the route to obtaining a character refined by faith, but they are not experiences we need to replicate to learn from them.

That is why Hebrews 11 exists—to call attention to men and women whose faith worked and to establish such character as a noble ambition. Although their transgressions are not inscribed here, they are instantly remembered against the contrast of these works of faith and the lesson becomes clear. Genuine faith and character are fired and hammered on the anvil of life until they are fashioned in excellence.

This series of lessons will mine the riches of Hebrews 11 in order to magnify the character of faith in these people, for “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (1). If, by it, the elders obtained a good testimony, we will likewise.

1. How would you define character?

2. How do we go about determining what makes for good character (John 12:48, First Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 5:12-14, First Peter 4:1-4, Second Peter 1:5-9)?

3. How did the elders obtain a good testimony (Hebrews 11:1-3)? Explain.

4. What does Paul say about God's approval (Romans 8:5-9, Second Corinthians 5:9-11, Galatians 1:10, First Thessalonians 4:1)? Compare to Matthew 10:32-37.

5. What kinds of things test character (First Peter 1:3-9, Acts 15:36-40, Second Timothy 4:10, John 12:41)?

## *Lesson 2: Godliness*

The beginning point of establishing character in our own hearts is to understand and appreciate the character of God himself. The Hebrew writer founds chapter 11 upon the nature of God who framed the worlds. The most succinct description of God's character was penned by the apostle John, who wrote simply that, "God is love" (First John 4:16). His love for mankind and creation are developed through daily providence, the chastening of his children and the extension of grace through his crucified son.

When the scriptures encourage the Christian to behave in a godly manner, it is with this strong element of character in mind. John continues to say that, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." A person with godly character speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), corrects the associates whom he loves (James 5:19-20) and shares what he has willingly and gladly (Titus 3:14).

Peter weighed in on the subject of a godly character while opening his second epistle. He asserted that God had given man all things that pertain to life and godliness—every piece of information necessary to obtaining eternal life and walking a commendable path (Second Peter 1:3). Moreover, that knowledge enables the believer to escape the corruption that is in the world through lust by partaking of the divine nature (verse 4). This is the essence of godliness and why it is so vital to the prevention of backsliding (verses 5-11). Samuel Logan Brengle said, "A holy person is like God ... He is good, and pure, and loving, and just, in the same way that God is."

Godliness is about seeking to live in a way sanctified by the scriptures, which predict and report the approval of God for the choices that we make. Striving to partake of the character of God and reflect the glory of Christ improves our own character. Peter taught that, "as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (First Peter 1:15).

A person of godly character shuns sin and seizes opportunities to do the right thing.

1. Godliness is at the center of building strong Biblical character. Paul tells Timothy something about the mystery of godliness (First Timothy 3:14-16). What is the focus of this mystery of godliness?

2. What objective means can we use to determine if we are godly (First John 2:3-6)? How did John define God's character (First John 4:7-16)?

3. Identify the expressions of godliness in each passage:

- a. First Timothy 2:2:
- b. First Timothy 2:10:
- c. First Timothy 4:7:
- d. First Timothy 6:3:
- e. First Timothy 6:13:

4. Consider Second Peter 1:2-11. What is necessary to partaking of God's nature?

5. What is wrong with the godliness of some in these last days (Second Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:16)?

## *Lesson 3: Willingness to Sacrifice*

Enrollment in God's Hebrews 11 hall of faith includes one man whose character was defined by his willingness to sacrifice obediently and willingly as a service to his God.

“By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.”

On the Atlantic shores of France, there is a graveyard at a place called Normandy where thousands of American men gave their lives to defeat a Nazi menace and liberate an oppressed nation. Today, their heroism is being repeated in Afghanistan and Iraq and the dead will continue to speak through the memory of their sacrifice.

Except for the fact that he died because of his sacrifice, we might not remember Abel, for there was nothing extraordinary about it. He simply heeded God's command and sacrificed willingly and obediently as an act of reverent praise (Romans 10:17). He shunned the attitudes that ruined his brother's worship—personal preference and convenience, for they motivated worship based on self.

Christians are asked by God every day to sacrifice their own interests and wealth in the name of something other than self. Whether it is the fruit of our lips (Hebrews 13:15) or the dollars in our pocket (First Corinthians 16:1-2) or time off our schedules (Titus 3:14), a willingness to sacrifice is necessary to building character. The same impediments will cross our path that crossed Cain's—personal preference and convenience, apathy toward God and others, complaints of too little to do any good. All those are the excuses of irreverence and ingratitude and shortsightedness.

A willingness to sacrifice self to praise God or enrich others will turn this life into what it is supposed to be (Philippians 2:1-4).



1. By what did Abel offer his sacrifice to God (Hebrews 11:4)? How does faith come (Romans 10:17)? Why was Abel's worship more pleasing to God than that of his brother (Genesis 4:1-8)?

2. How did Abel obtain witness that he was righteous? There are two elements necessary to your answer (James 2:14-26, Galatians 5:6).

3. Cain chose to worship God in the way that suited him in terms of convenience and pride. Instead of sacrificing an animal by faith, he just brought some fruit from his ground. What kinds of things are Christians asked to sacrifice today (Hebrews 13:15, First Corinthians 16:1-2, Philippians 4:18, Titus 3:14)? How might Cain's attitude get in the way (Luke 10:25-37)?

4. How do we go about presenting our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-16)?

5. What mind was in Christ Jesus and should be in us (Philippians 2:1-8)?

## *Lesson 4: Diligent Service*

We consider Enoch, “who was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:5-6).

Genesis 5:22 reports that Enoch walked with God and Jude comments much later that he was also a prophet who preached harsh judgment upon the impenitent. In an era where righteousness was declining toward the deluge, Enoch fought the course of the world in order to walk with God (see First Peter 4:1-5).

Enoch found the approval of God, not arbitrarily or luckily, but because he diligently sought it. The approval of God is a noble objective, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad” (Second Corinthians 5:10). At that point, the approval of God will be the only thing in the world that will matter to us; right now, it should already be the thing that matters most. “Therefore we make it our aim whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to him” (Second Corinthians 5:9).

God truly is a rewarder of those who seek him diligently. Jesus exhorted his listeners to “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks, it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8). The approval of God is worth the effort and the personal expense it takes to secure, but so many people give up too quickly. They start out seeking divine approval and become distracted by the pleasures of the recreational gospel. Their diligence is crushed under the weight of hot dogs in the church gym.

Character that adopts the example of Enoch focuses on spiritual service to the Lord and seeks his pleasure with single-minded diligence. Such character is not easily overcome by making excuses, justifying slothfulness or shrinking back into perdition. Instead, this kind of character secures God’s approval through an energetic effort to do his will (Matthew 7:21) and plead for his grace (Ephesians 2:8-10).

1. What did Paul say about “pleasing God” (Second Corinthians 5:9-10, Galatians 1:10, Colossians 1:9-10, First Thessalonians 2:4, cf. Hebrews 13:20-21)?

2. Enoch was spared from physical death because he so pleased God in whatever special circumstances he lived. What more do we know about Enoch (Genesis 5:22-24, Jude 14-15)?

3. The Hebrew writer, though, reveals that pleasing God requires more than just believing him. What is added (Hebrews 11:6)? How did Jesus illustrate this initial diligence (Matthew 7:7-10)?

4. Rightly dividing the word of truth is a major part of diligent service like Enoch’s. What is necessary to please God in this matter (Second Timothy 2:15, First Timothy 4:13, Acts 17:11, First Peter 3:15-16)? What else is necessary (Galatians 6:10, Hebrews 10:35-39)?

5. Why was God no longer pleased with the efforts going on in Sardis (Revelation 3:1-7) and Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)?

## *Lesson 5: Reverence*

Our series of lessons on character, inspired by the great men and women of Hebrews 11, continues as we consider Noah, who by faith and “being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7).

Noah’s faith and godly fear compelled him to rise above the iniquity and disbelief that so characterized his generation. When God regretted making man and decided to start over, he did not arbitrarily select Noah as his boat-builder. Instead, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” because he was just, had integrity and walked with God (Genesis 6:8-9). He proved to be a wise choice, for he constructed the ark precisely as Jehovah designed it—“Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did” (Genesis 6:22).

Godly fear, or reverence, was an important facet of Noah’s effective faith. The sudden deaths of Nadab and Abihu prove just how important it is to every faith, for God proclaimed, “By those who come near me, I must be regarded as holy” (Leviticus 10:3). The psalmist stated that God’s name is holy and reverend (111:9) and he is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). It is for this reason that we endeavor to speak only as the oracles of God (First Peter 4:11) and to be found pleasing to him at all times (Second Corinthians 5:9-11).

While our godly fear motivates our obedience and humbles our approach to God, it only devolves into terror and torment if we slip back into sin. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (First John 4:17-18). On the surface, it may appear that God has contradicted himself, but the faith of Noah understands the difference between reverent, godly fear and carnal, ungodly terror.

Reverence will prevent us from presumptively altering the work of the church or indulging in personal transgressions, so that we can be just, have integrity and walk with God (cf. Matthew 17:4).

1. Was the world in which Noah lived a very reverent place, considering its proximity to Creation (Genesis 6:1-7)? What was it like?

2. Why did God make a distinction in Noah—was it an arbitrary choice or were there objective criteria? Explain.

3. What moved Noah to build the ark (Hebrews 11:7)? Was it that he had seen so many floods already and knew this one would be worse? How did Noah prove his reverent attitude toward the Lord, unlike the attitude of later man such as Nabab and Abihu (Genesis 6:22, Leviticus 10:1-3)?

4. Does John teach that reverence is overrated and that godly fear is actually wrong for the Christian (First John 4:17-19)? How can you harmonize John's statements with the goodness of godly fear (cf. Hebrews 12:29)?

5. How does reverence impact our worship, teaching and choices (Ephesians 5:8-17, First Peter 4:11, Matthew 17:1-4)?

## *Lesson 6: Trust in God*

Abraham trusted in God that he was righteous.

“By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (8-10).

Trust in God is an attribute that sounds much easier than it is to develop, for there are so many sources of confidence competing with him for our attention. In the New Testament, we find men trusting in uncertain riches, oxidizing armor, fallible Moses and even themselves. Even today, our trust in God is often only strong when times are prosperous and challenges are few. Although he might have directed us through a Red Sea of doubt and misery yesterday, today’s hardship can instantly renew a sense of shortsighted anxiety in the believer.

Then here is Abraham, who departed Ur for Canaan without so much as a map. I don’t even go to Dallas without consulting Mapquest first, but Abraham trusted God enough to go when he said to go. Some would say that God had proven himself in extraordinary ways to Abraham and that his faith is really not that striking. No doubt, God was convincing, but has he really failed to impress you with his presence and might? This God has created the universe, authored spiritual atonement and provided answers to our prayers. Time and again, he has been there when we needed him and when we imagined doom at the end of every day. Somewhere between prayer and providence, we were sustained. Do we begin to doubt now?

Let us not resemble the temporary, worthless disciples of John chapter 6 who ate miracle fish and the next day asked, What sign will you perform that we might believe you today? Trust in God and your character will grow.



1. Nothing shows more godly character than the implicit trust a believer has in God. How did Abraham prove his character and trust (Hebrews 11:8-10)? Why did he do it?

2. In what circumstances might a person be required to leave behind the familiar and tangible in order to obey God by going out (Hebrews 13:10-14)? What price did Abraham have to pay for his trust?

3. Can you list some ways in which God has proven himself trustworthy to you (James 1:16-18)?

4. When is it hardest to trust in God? What does the devil want?

5. Peter describes our trust as “living hope” (First Peter 1:3-9) and “exceedingly great and precious promises” (Second Peter 1:1-11). In what ways does he see our trust tested?

## *Lesson 7: Discernment*

Sarah discerned that God was faithful in making promises.

“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged him faithful who had promised” (11:11).

Discernment, the process of making judgments, has gotten a bad rap in a world awash in the psychological folly of men like Carl Rogers. We are warned to be non-judgmental, to re-clarify our values and to eschew all objective standards of “truth.” Yet there was Sarah, listening to God promise that her 90-year-old body would bring forth fruit, and she had to judge whether the speaker was reliable.

Discernment is an important element of character. It is the ability to judge situations and promises in a way that is always realistic, usually optimistic and never pessimistic. A person is a great discouragement when he automatically prejudices others as being unworthy or doomed to failure. He creates around him an environment of distrust and despair because his discernment is tainted with pessimism. Yet all that must be balanced with a healthy dose of realism, so that one is not constantly abused and deceived by those who would do him harm (Matthew 10:16).

While the promises and claims of men are often hard to trust implicitly, Sarah was dealing with the promise of God. In particular, he predicted that she would give birth in her advanced years. After some initial shock, Sarah believed God could do it and he did. Isaac was born by grace through faith—God’s grace upon a barren womb and Sarah’s faith in cooperating with him (“she bore a child ... because she judged him faithful”).

We have been made many exceedingly great and precious promises by God (Second Peter 1:4) and he is faithful to treat us as children on Earth and make us heirs of eternity (Hebrews 6:9-20). There is no way of knowing how many blessings one can forfeit if discernment is not part of his character—if he lacks the ability to make impartial and optimistic judgments.

1. As sure as God must judge Sarah, Sarah also judged God, though not in the same sense. In what sense did Sarah judge God (Hebrews 11:11-12)? On what basis can God be judged this way (Hebrews 6:13-18)? Or, in other words, what is faith (Hebrews 11:1)?

2. At least two missteps are taken by Sarah on the way to conceiving this child of promise. What are they?

- Genesis 16:1-16:
- Genesis 18:1-15:

3. A problem that plagued the Pharisees and Sadducees still plagues modern man. What is it (Matthew 16:1-4)? Explain.

4. Consider Matthew 7:1-5. Is discernment (or, judging) always wrong (cf. John 7:24)? What manner of discernment is recommended by the Hebrew writer (5:12-14)? With what standard (John 12:48)?

5. How do we discern that there is a God and that his word and promises are reliable (see First Corinthians 10:1-12)?

## *Lesson 8: Assurance*

The characters of Hebrews 11 share a faith in God that motivated them to acts of greatness and service. The first section of the passage honored the stalwarts of Bible history from Adam to Abraham, including their wives. Yet, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (13).

Assurance is the element of our character that replaces humanistic impostors like self-esteem, worry and pride. A sense of assurance concerning the promises of God and the worth that he lends to us makes it unnecessary for the Christian to participate in the rat race that humans inevitably lose simply by running. Assured saints are secure in their value, confident about eternity and content with their lot on earth.

In spite of his persecutions and hardships, the apostle Paul possessed blessed assurance: “For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep what I have committed to him until that day” (Second Timothy 1:12). His speech does not betray moments of intense doubt and distrust about God, such as are becoming common today.

Assurance is the element of character that moors us to heaven, attaches us to an immovable foundation and anchors us against a constantly shifting sea. “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19). Although nothing is more discomfiting than being in a foreign land, with strange language, customs and terrain, assured Christians have the character to sojourn in this wicked world without becoming of this wicked world. God is not ashamed to be our God, for we desire a heavenly country, a comfortable home, and the Lord has prepared a city for us beyond the clouds. With that assurance, who can be against us and prevail?

1. Consider Hebrews 11:13. The men and women under examination died in faith, not having received the promises that were afar off. They died in faith because they did three things. List them.

2. How did Paul describe his blessed assurance (Second Timothy 1:12)?

3. How do we know that God wants us to “rest assured” now (First John 5:12-13, 2:1-6)? How is that assurance obtained and maintained?

4. What are some attitudes or elements destroy assurance?

a. Matthew 6:25-34:

b. Philippians 4:10-13:

c. James 1:2-8:

d. First Timothy 6:20-21:

e. Hebrews 10:26-39:

5. Consider Hebrews 11:13-16. What makes Christians “strangers and pilgrims” (First Peter 2:11-12, 4:1-5, Philippians 4:6-9)? Is apostasy yet possible (Second Timothy 4:10, Galatians 5:1-4)?

## *Lesson 9: Confidence*

The men and women enshrined in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith share elements of extraordinary character that enabled them to achieve great things by virtue of their faith in God. Abraham is mentioned here more than once, for that patriarch blazed a trail of conviction that we have been following ever since.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son ... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense” (17-19).

It is Abraham’s confidence in the power of God that impresses here when we consider the patriarch’s character. For a man who had previously doubted God’s power to the point that he tried to use fornication to help him out, his deduction that the son of promise could not be utterly lost so quickly is striking. How much confidence do we put in the promises of God, the power of prayer and the practical application of both to everyday life?

James urges us to ask God for wisdom, but to “ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (1:6). There stands Abraham, preparing the fire that could consume his only son, listening to Isaac’s ironic questions, always confident that the son of promise will not be lost for good. He is fully prepared to take that leap of faith that causes sensible people to suspend our human limitations on divine potential and to wait for God to do great things.

Christians are the owners of “exceedingly great and precious promises” which motivate us to escape the corruption of the world and permit us to partake of the divine nature (Second Peter 1:4). If we have character, it is not due to an excess of self-confidence, but a conscious reliance upon the presence of God. This faith becomes “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Hebrews 6:19). We know whom we have believed and are persuaded that he is able to keep our souls until the day of judgment (Second Timothy 1:12).

1. How did Abraham show his confidence in God against all odds (Hebrews 11:17-19)? Read the account of this event in Genesis 22:1-14. List a couple ways in which Abraham further proves his confidence.

2. To what is hope compared in Hebrews 6:19-20? Read Romans 4:16-21 and explain the context, focusing upon the phrase in verse 18, “who, contrary to hope, in hope believed.”

3. One occasion for a decline of confidence is when prayers seem to go unanswered. What did Paul say when his request was not granted by God (Second Corinthians 12:7-10)?

4. How does the Hebrew writer describe our confidence in approaching God in prayer (Hebrews 4:14-16)? Will all prayers be answered (First John 5:14-15)? Will all prayers be answered affirmatively (James 4:1-4)? Why, or why not?

5. Consider First Timothy 4:8-10. What does trust in God inspire the faithful to do?

## *Lesson 10: Blessing*

Hebrews 11 is written to bolster the strength of our faithful character, using examples from the past to show us what we can be.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it, the elders obtained a good testimony” (1-2). Divine approval is secured, not through an idle mental faith, but through an active, practical trust in the guidance of the Lord (James 1:22-25, 2:18-26).

We come to the example of Abraham’s son and grandsons. “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come” (20).

A vital element of the Christian’s character is the desire and fruitfulness of adding blessing to the lives of those around you. This selfless aspect of character distinguishes Christianity from carnal mindsets and worldly lifestyles that place emphasis upon the self and make “looking out for Number 1” into an excuse for trampling upon others.

While Isaac’s blessing touched on the future of two nations, Israel and Edom, our ability to add blessing to others may seem inferior, even insignificant to the point of futility. God, however, has not called us to do the impossible, but to answer his plea wherever we are and however we are able. By self-sacrifice, we visit widows and orphans in their distress, become good Samaritans to the weary and downtrodden, and save souls from the error of their ways. Compared to the affairs of two entire nations, that may not seem like much, but to the person who is blessed, it is everything.

The key is found in Philippians 2:3-4: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Uttering the futile and usually vain phrase, “God bless you,” following a sneeze does not make blessing part of your character. Being ready to defend your faith and to utter words fitly spoken in times of distress does (First Peter 3:15, Proverbs 25:11). Praying for and with the sinner blesses him (James 5:16). Mowing the widow’s yard and playing catch with the fatherless is a blessing that will not be forgotten (James 1:27, Isaiah 3:10).

1. The account of Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau is found in Genesis 27. Who orchestrated the switch in their blessings? How? What blessing did each son receive?

2. What attitudes are necessary to bless others? What attitudes get in the way (Acts 20:35, Philippians 2:1-4)?

3. How do we go about blessing the following:

- a. Widows (First Timothy 5):
- b. Orphans (James 1:27):
- c. Wayward (Galatians 6:1-5):
- d. Unruly, fainthearted, weak (First Thessalonians 5:14):

4. Beyond responding to their sneezes, how do we bless our enemies (Matthew 5:38-48)? Think and be practical in your answer.

5. Read Romans 12. What is the opposite of blessing (see also James 3)? In a few words, what is the theme of Romans 12?

## *Lesson II: Posterity*

Hebrews chapter 11 describes the effects of an active, functional faith. It is only by faith that the great characters of the Bible and the anonymous people of ancient Israel accomplished marvelous things in the service of God. From their examples, we learn that while an idle faith is dead, an active faith is vital and effective.

“By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshiped, leaning upon the top of his staff” (21).

The writer makes reference to two distinct events both at the close of Jacob’s storied life. Chronologically, they are reversed from the Genesis account of them, however. The Hebrew writer only hints at what actually occurred, compelling the reader to consult the account of Moses to learn their significance.

Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph, but he overruled the natural human intent to favor the firstborn by placing his right hand on the head of Ephraim instead of Manasseh (Genesis 48:1-22). By faith, the patriarch was resigned to the will of a power higher even than his own.

Earlier, he worshiped, leaning upon his staff to solemnize the vow he shared with Joseph as death approached (Genesis 47:27-31). “Please do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers; you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place.” Joseph’s belief in the Promised Land and the oaths made by God to Abraham were strong enough that his faith carried him through to the very end—and beyond.

Jacob’s faithful character is displayed in the interest he takes in his posterity. He is concerned with the fate of his offspring enough to pass along God’s will to them. Joseph’s hope is so rooted in Canaan that he would not even permit physical death to keep him from it.

If our character is to be great, we will likewise be required to express our faith regarding our posterity. We must reverence God in our homes and make our own salvation sure.

1. The account of Jacob blessing his grandsons is found in Genesis 48. Read the passage and find the words that describe Jacob's feelings about his posterity.
2. What do Proverbs 13:22 and 17:6 say about grandchildren? What warning is found in Exodus 34:5-7?
3. What wisdom can be gleaned from the Proverbs about raising children (20:11, 22:6, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15)?
4. Where did Eli go wrong and what was the result (First Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25, 3:10-18, 4:10-18)? What does Paul say (Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:21)? Explain.
5. Read Genesis 47:27-31. What was Jacob's "last wish"? What does it show about him? How do we show the same sort of attitude (Philippians 1:19-26)?

## *Lesson 12: Final Resting Place Concerns*

The middle verses of the Hebrews 11 chapter of faithful characters focus on the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Verse 22 reads, “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.”

The reader is left to glean something from these cryptic words and to search out the records of Genesis and Exodus to discern what they mean. They were spoken near the end of his life while Joseph and his family lived in an Egyptian oasis from the famine at home. Lingering around the Hebrews was the old promise that God would bring them into a land of their own, a land of promise. With his dying breaths, Joseph reminded his people of that promise and staked his soul to it. “I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob ... and you shall carry up my bones from here.” The 110-year-old leader breathed his last and was “mummified” in Egypt.

Many years later, God was moved to rescue Israel from an Egypt that had become unfriendly to them, and to begin the Exodus toward Canaan. “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him” (Exodus 13:19). After a forty-year journey, Moses died in Moab and Joshua finished the task of conquering Canaan. “The bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel had brought up out of Egypt, they buried at Shechem” (Joshua 24:32).

The final resting place of Joseph’s bones makes little practical difference, for even cremation could not prevent his eventual resurrection. Joseph’s concern for his bones became an abiding illustration of trusting in God’s promise of a better land. When they finally were plunged beneath the soil, it was a celebration of a promise fulfilled.

Just the same, it makes little difference where our bones are buried, but there must be some way by which our lives can illustrate the journey home after we are gone. We hold many great and precious promises in our hearts that we need to impress upon our offspring (Second Peter 1:4). A determined, persevering faith, even unto death, is unimpeachable testimony that we hold those promises to be trustworthy.

1. The account of Joseph's last wish is recorded in Genesis 50:15-26. Why were Joseph and his brothers in Egypt at all? Where did Joseph want his final resting place to be? Why?

2. When did Joseph's bones begin to leave Egypt (Exodus 13:19)? Where were they buried (Joshua 24:32)?

3. What attitude is expressed in Joseph's concern for his bones? Is it vitally important today whether men are buried or cremated, or interred here or there? What was Joseph really saying?

4. Instead of bones, what did these people leave behind?

a. Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43):

b. Lois and Eunice (Second Timothy 1:3-7):

c. Paul (Second Timothy 4:6-8):

d. Peter (Second Peter 1:12-15):

5. How can we show our concern for our true final resting place (Second Peter 1:1-11, 3:10-18)?

## *Lesson 13: Review (I)*

1. How would you define character? How do we go about determining what makes for good character (John 12:48, First Timothy 3:15, Hebrews 5:12-14, First Peter 4:1-4, Second Peter 1:5-9)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Consider Second Peter 1:2-11. What is necessary to partaking of God's nature?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How do we go about presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-16)? What mind was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:1-8)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Why was God no longer pleased with the efforts going on in Sardis (Revelation 3:1-7) and Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Why did God make a distinction in Noah—was it an arbitrary choice or were there objective criteria?

6. Peter describes our trust as “living hope” (First Peter 1:3-9) and “exceedingly great and precious promises” (Second Peter 1:1-11). In what ways does he see our trust tested?

7. Consider Matthew 7:1-5. Is discernment (or, judging) wrong always (cf. John 7:24)? What manner of discernment is recommended by the Hebrew writer (5:12-14)? With what standard (John 12:48)?

8. Consider Hebrews 11:13. The men and women under examination died in faith, not having received the promises that were afar off. They died in faith because they did three things. List them.

9. How does the Hebrew writer describe our confidence in approaching God in prayer (Hebrews 4:14-16)? Will all prayers be answered (First John 5:14-15)? Will all prayers be answered affirmatively (James 4:1-4)?

10. What attitudes are necessary to bless others? What attitudes get in the way (Acts 20:35, Philippians 2:1-4)?

11. What wisdom can be gleaned from the Proverbs about raising children (20:11, 22:6, 22:15, 23:13, 29:15)?

12. How can we show our concern for our true final resting place (Second Peter 1:1-11, 3:10-18)?

## *Lesson 14: Civil Disobedience*

Who would have thought that civil disobedience could be among the virtues effected by an active faith in Hebrews 11?

Verse 23 reads, “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s command.”

Moses was born under a death sentence, for the Egyptian pharaoh had decreed that every newborn Hebrew boy should be cast into the river to stem the population growth of the unwelcome visitors. Just then, a Levite couple conceived and born a beautiful son, whom his parents managed to conceal for three months. When she finally did walk down to the river of death, she placed him in an ark—a basket made of bulrushes and waited to see if his life could be preserved somehow. As his sister watched, Pharaoh’s daughter discovered the small craft and compassionately adopted him as her own. The life of the man who would frustrate a Pharaoh and bring Egypt to its knees was saved by faithful civil disobedience.

Faith can be sorely tested when a powerful authority cajoles or insists that those in submission commit sin. Fathers, husbands, governments, and employers are all in such positions, and sometimes demand things that violate God’s will. Peter faced this challenge from the religious leaders of Jerusalem, who ordered him and the other apostles to stop preaching Jesus or face death. He replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). “We ought to obey God rather than men” (5:29).

Many early Christians loved their earthly lives less than Heaven, forfeiting them when commanded to recant their faith or bow to an idol (Hebrews 13:3, Revelation 2:13). Today, employers sometimes demand that we drink. Governments demand that doctors perform abortions, judges marry homosexuals and pharmacists supply pregnancy termination pills. Some unbelieving husbands and fathers even urge their families to forsake the assembling. Then faith leads us to acts of civil disobedience, that we might be true and loyal to God.

Civil disobedience is an act of courage, but must never become just an excuse for selfish, illegal behavior that could be avoided.

1. Whose faith is applauded in Hebrews 11:23? What act proved that faith? What motivated it?

2. Amram and Jochebed committed acts of civil disobedience, which can sometimes be a character virtue. Who else committed civil disobedience in this episode and how (Exodus 1:15-2:10)?

3. What became of Moses because of the faith of these four?

4. List a few authority figures who can sometimes influence or insist that Christians do something sinful.

**AUTHORITY FIGURE**

**SINFUL DEMAND**

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

5. How did the apostles respond to that kind of pressure (Acts 4:19-20, 5:29)? Some Jewish rulers (John 12:42)? Why? What is the point (Matthew 10:32-39, Titus 1:16)?

## *Lesson 15: Parental Courage*

A life that exemplifies the character of Christ will certainly include the attribute of courage. This important aspect of genuine faith was found also in the parents of Moses who hid their infant son for three months rather than subjecting him to Pharaoh's infanticide edict, "because they saw that he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command" (Hebrews 11:23).

This character walk through Hebrews 11 stops to ponder the attitude and action of Moses's parents who lived in a time when the Israelites' Egyptian hosts had tired of their presence and become concerned that they would join in a rebellion. Little boys like Moses were born under a death sentence in perhaps the world's first case of ethnic cleansing.

Beyond just another example of godly courage, Moses's parents show us parental courage. There is something about looking into the eyes of a child, especially your own, that inspires a willingness to do most anything for him. Perhaps this is why abortionists don't want their clients to see detailed photography of their own wombs—it's bad for business.

Today, the need for stern parental courage extends far beyond the infant years. Our children face life-altering temptations at earlier ages than ever—tobacco, alcohol, narcotics, gangs, fornication. A parent must have the courage to take charge of the home, vilify sin and extol virtue. It is the courage to bring kids up in Christ's nurture and admonition when many parents are allowing Eminem and Britney Spears to do the job for them (Ephesians 6:4). It is the courage to train them up in the way they should go when moral relativists are suggesting that guidance is stifling and narrow-minded (Proverbs 22:6). It is the courage to employ the rod of correction when Dr. Spock and the majority of "parenting experts" and school boards call that counterproductive abuse (Proverbs 22:15).

Parental courage means knowing who your kids are, who their friends are, where they are going, and when they are coming home. Does your faith include that kind of parental mettle?



## Lesson 16: Self-Sacrifice

Faith is the ultimate character-builder. While there are unbelievers who exhibit certain elements of character, without a foundation of godly faith, it is always an incomplete example. The men and woman of Hebrews 11 demonstrate how integral faith is to building character.

“By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

Everyone knows the story of Moses, who was born under a death sentence for all Hebrew males. His parents found a way to defy the awful order and preserve his life, but the time came when he had to stand up for who he was. Surely he could have continued to live the life of luxury, but his conscience would not permit it. Many centuries later, Queen Esther of Persia made the same decision, risking her throne to deliver her people from a genocidal mandate.

The Hebrew writer is plain: In the faithful perspective of Moses, he was richer as a poor, persecuted Hebrew than as the rich grandson of Egypt's ruler. This is the poorness of spirit that Christ talked about in the beatitudes, which brings one toward the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). It is the element of character that rendered the poverty-stricken Smyrnans rich in faith and hope (Revelation 2:9).

There is a reward attached to sharing and giving and sacrificing that the greedy, stingy and self-centered never comprehend. And when that sacrifice is so clearly due to conviction, the reward comes in the currency of faith and hope and it proves invaluable. “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (First Peter 4:16).



1. Hebrews 10:24-26 describes the sacrifices made by Moses in order to do the right thing by his God. We learn that he forsook Pharaoh's household to suffer the reproach of Christ with his Hebrew brethren. Under what circumstances did Moses flee Egypt (Exodus 2:11-15)?

2. Some might guess that it only came to Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt at the burning bush, but that is untrue. When did Moses make the choice to join his brethren (Exodus 2:11-15, Acts 7:17-30)?

3. How could Moses have suffered the reproach of Christ more than a thousand years before Jesus was born on Earth (First Peter 1:10-12)?

4. What do these passages say about the reproach of Christ?

a. Matthew 5:10-12:

b. John 15:18-25:

c. Acts 5:26-42:

d. Second Thessalonians 1:3-10:

e. First Peter 3:13-18, 4:12-19:

5. What sacrifices might a Christian make today (Philippians 2:1-18)?

## *Lesson 17: Communion*

This series on character, drawn from the heroes of Hebrews 11, continues to examine the life of Moses, perhaps the greatest mortal man who ever lived. “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith, he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them” (27-28).

The Hebrew writer reminds us of the era of the ten plagues, when God prepared to free his people from slavery to the Egyptian Pharaoh. What frogs and flies did not accomplish, the blood of every firstborn male in the nation did. Moses was told to evacuate Egypt with every Hebrew he could muster into a company, but the slave driver soon regretted his decision and ordered a pursuit of the pilgrims. The Hebrew writer attributed Moses’s resilience to the courage he derived from acknowledging an invisible God.

Character, today, is likewise determined by a person’s ability to acknowledge and commune with a Godhead that cannot be seen by mortal eyes. We communicate with him in prayer and song and commune with him in the Lord’s Supper, convinced that, “where two or three are gathered together in [his] name, [he] is there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Courage is derived from the reality of this relationship because the Christian fully comprehends that with God, all things are possible and if God is for us, who can be against us? “For he himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5-6).

While Moses had the privilege of meeting with God in a burning bush, a mighty mountain and along the way to Canaan, Christians are granted through their savior a similar opportunity. Our high priest has entered the holiest place, making it possible that we should approach the throne of grace boldly to find mercy and help in times of need (Hebrews 4:14-16). With that behind us and in front of us, courage becomes an integral part of our communion and character.



## *Lesson 18: Determination*

It has been decades since a big budget filmmaker attempted to depict the event on the silver screen; one wonders what James Cameron and \$200 million could do. “By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned” (Hebrews 11:29).

As one might imagine, the miraculous trek through the parted waters did not come without a period of crisis first. When the Israelites first saw that they were caught between water and warriors, they cursed Moses for bringing them on a suicide mission (Exodus 14:10-12). In the midst of his pursuit, Pharaoh figured the Hebrews were bewildered by the land and closed in by the wilderness (3), and nobody seemed to understand that God had a plan.

It took immeasurable trust for that first Hebrew pilgrim to step between the parted waters onto the bottom of the sea floor. Can anyone imagine the sensation of walking between two massive walls of suspended flood, as the distant bank gets closer and the enemy further behind? Half a million Hebrews and an entire cohort of Egyptians saw the power of trusting in God that day, even as the waters crashed back upon themselves when Moses stretched out his hand the second time (26-31). “Thus Israel saw the great work which the Lord had done in Egypt; so the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and his servant Moses.” And that attitude lasted all of three days (15:22-26)!

If our righteousness is to exceed that of the plaintive Hebrew pilgrims, our level of trust in God will need to carry us through all our Red



Seas of doubt, disappointment and dejection with a firmer certainty than they possessed. Even the great miracle was only enough to steady their faith until their mouths parched. We stand upon a greater miracle—the resurrection of Christ—but will our faith transport us all the way to the Promised Land?

1. We learn from Hebrews that the pilgrims passed through the parted Red Sea “by faith.” What did the Egyptians do to shake their faith (Exodus 14:1-12)? How did God save them (14:13-31)?

2. How did Israel react once they safely reached the other side of the Sea (Exodus 14:31) How long did this attitude persist (15:22-26)? What stopped it?

3. This is a lesson in trust and how that trust is threatened by enemies, by seemingly unmet needs and by doubt. How did Paul express his trust in God (Second Timothy 1:12)? What threatened his trust (Second Corinthians 11:23-30)?

4. What were the threats in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23)?

5. How does the pilgrims’ example teach us about trust today (First Corinthians 10:1-13)?

## *Lesson 19: Implicit Belief*

The Hebrew writer returns to the faith of the pilgrims to emphasize the aspect of persistent submissiveness in their character. He says, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days” (11:30).

Modernist commentators, who like to feign a belief in the Bible while rejecting all of its miracles, suggest that Joshua’s record of this event may have left out an actual military assault on the structure. Others scoff at the scriptural account as unscientific and impossible. Here, you see, is where faith is tested and proven. Modernists don’t have it, and there are more of them than one might think. So many of our religious neighbors have bought into the concept that the Bible is filled with mythology and exaggerations. For them, the serpent in Eden is a borrowed pagan motif and the creation week took God millions of years. Mary is more likely a fornicator than a virgin mother and the crucifixion of Christ is a clever fable concocted by disappointed disciples like Peter and John.

Such a faith that clings to God while trampling on his word is not faith at all. It is modernistic materialism, plain and simple. Far from being faith, it is the rejection of faith in the name of naturalism. The Holy Spirit, who should know, claims that the walls of Jericho fell after the Hebrew army marched around for seven days, because that was the battle strategy issued by God (Joshua 6). Is there any scientific explanation for those walls falling down? No! There is, however, a faith explanation. God, who spoke light and life into existence, answered the implicit belief of his army by prospering their effort.

Speculation and skepticism have replaced implicit belief in the declining faith of many. Pseudo-scientists have paraded so many monkey cousins in front of us for so long that many of us can no longer take the Bible at face value. Be not deceived: If your faith gives way in one area—belief in the supernatural—it will give way in others—trust in Christ, submission to his will and the abiding hope of heaven. It’s a slippery slope.

1. By what did the walls of Jericho fall? Was it by that alone (cf. James 2:26)? Is there some scientific or engineering reason that city walls should fall down simply because people have walked around them?

2. Read about the fall of Jericho in Joshua 5:13-6:21. Who came up with the idea of encircling the city for seven days? What else was involved in the scheme? Where does faith enter in?

3. The walls of modern learning stand against anything supernatural. What are some miraculous things a Christian must believe?

- Genesis 1:1-31:
- Matthew 1:18-25:
- Luke 24:1-7:
- John 20:30-31:
- First Corinthians 12:1-11:

4. Implicit belief is an absolute faith without qualification or reservation. How is it challenged or displayed in times of prayer and need (Matthew 14:22-33, James 1:2-8, First John 5:14-15)?

5. What often separates implicit belief from a faith of convenience (Matthew 7:21-27)?

## *Lesson 20: Belief Amidst Skepticism*

The Bible tells us that faith is the victory that overcomes the world and that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things we have not seen. Faith, however, is easier to possess when it is popular. When genuine faith is out of season, the challenge is on and true mettle is proven.

A sinner in ancient Jericho showed the power of belief amidst skepticism when she acknowledged the God of Heaven, did his bidding and was rewarded. “By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace” (Hebrews 11:31).

The reference cites the events surrounding the invasion of Jericho by Joshua’s army of the Lord. Rahab hid Joshua’s spies in her house as the king sought to kill them and then explained that she understood that her land had been given to Jehovah’s people. “And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11).

While the city was being conquered, Rahab was sitting in her house, a scarlet cord in her window, under the protection of Jehovah God. She made up a tiny remnant saved in the midst of destruction.

We arrive at a time in our history when true Bible faith is held by a small minority. Eastern religions, Protestantism, lingering Judaism, Catholicism and atheism far outnumber the adherents of the New Testament creed alone. Holding forth devout faith in Christ can be invitation enough to the scorn of academics and intellectuals, but taking a stand on the New Testament brings ridicule even from those who fashion themselves “believers,” for they have abandoned the “rigidity” of revelation for the smoothness of feeling.

Paul, however, commands Timothy to preach the word even when it is unpopular (Second Timothy 4:1-5) and Jesus promises to crown those who are faithful even unto death (Revelation 2:10). We may excuse our indiscretions in those challenging times on the basis that a temporary denial of faith bought preservation of esteem, but when we deny Christ, even for a moment, we sacrifice something far more valuable. We lose the peculiarity of being his special people and the sanctification that is both the means and end of living a pure lifestyle.

1. How can one tell that true faith is “out of season” (Second Timothy 4:1-5)? What does this mean?
2. How did Rahab the harlot react to the presence of God’s spies with true faith (Hebrews 11:31, Joshua 2:1-21)? Did the king of Jericho share her conviction?
3. Who today are skeptical about the Bible’s claim that there is one faith and one church (Ephesians 4:1-6, 1:22-23, Matthew 16:16) and that Jesus is the resurrected son of God (First Corinthians 15:1-19)?
4. What happened to Rahab when she did her good deed (James 2:24-25, Joshua 6:22-25)?
5. About what was Pilate skeptical (John 18:33-38)? What cured Thomas’ skepticism (John 20:24-29)? What might hinder us (Revelation 2:10)?

## *Lesson 21: Perseverance*

After rehearsing a long list of characters of great faith, the writer of Hebrews 11 concludes the chapter with a few more names and then the anonymous remainder of a great cloud of witnesses that watch our daily conversation (32-40):

And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

When we talk about persecution in our day, we are generally describing some comedian making fun of religious folks on television, or maybe one of our friends acted amazed that we would go to a gospel meeting instead of a football game. The Old Testament worthies that are the focus of this chapter faced far worse and maintained their faith. Their perseverance is the key, for the original audience of this Hebrew letter contemplated abandoning Jesus to renew good relations with unbelieving Jews.

In spite of Calvin's widely held error of "once saved, always saved," there exists a peril of apostasy (10:26-39). These worthies defeated it before Christ and many in the Hebrew audience survived as well. Will you (12:3-29)? It's a matter of character and your eternal fate.

1. Read Hebrews 11:32-38. Identify an act of faithful character committed by each of the following men:

- Gideon (Judges 6:11-7:25):
- Barak (Judges 4:6-24):
- Samson (Judges 13:24-16:31):
- Jephthah (Judges 11:1-12:7):
- David (First Samuel 16-17):
- Samuel (First Samuel 7:9-14):

2. What did these prophets endure?

- Elijah (First Kings 19:1-4):
- Elisha (Second Kings 2:23-25):
- Jeremiah (20:1-2, 26:7-11, 36:5):
- Zechariah (Matthew 23:34-39):
- Others (Acts 7:51-53):

3. All these suffered terrible persecution. What did Paul say about persecution?

- Romans 8:31-39:
- Second Timothy 3:12:

4. In what ways are American Christians most likely to be persecuted here at home? When does persecution include physical danger?



5. How did these worthies obtain a good

testimony? How will we obtain such a testimony (Galatians 5:6, James 2:14-26)?

## *Lesson 22: A Great Cloud of Witnesses*

The character of the characters of Hebrews 11 is what concerns us in this series of studies. Taken together, Abraham, Noah, Rahab, and all the others combine to form a great “cloud of witnesses” according to the verses that follow. In many ways, Hebrews 12 is just the application of the more celebrated eleventh chapter, and we do well always to make the application of truth.

The writer has not merely recorded an analysis of Hebrew history. Instead, he has surrounded the reader with familiar witnesses who will testify to the importance of faithfulness and perseverance. Paul did likewise when writing First Corinthians 10 and confirmed the principle in Romans 15:4: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

In the midst of such stalwarts who sacrificed and endured beyond our imagination, it becomes reasonable that we should “lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). The king of survivors, Jesus Christ, sits upon his throne beside Jehovah, watching our efforts and rooting for our success as well (2).

We share the fellowship and brotherhood of faith with the characters of chapter 11 and even with the Redeemer of chapter 12 (see 2:11). Although the original audience for this letter endured familial and societal hostility, it was little compared to the crimes committed against Jesus (3). Moreover, the persecutions that assault modern men are generally even less severe in comparison, for few have had to resist to the point of “bloodshed, striving against sin” (4).

This cloud of witnesses compels us to renew our perspective and to learn that we must stop excusing disobedience on some inflated idea about the severity of our injuries. Yes, we suffer persecution, but persecution has never guaranteed or justified apostasy. Stand fast!

1. Consider Hebrews 11:1-12:4. How does the writer collectively refer to this group of men and women of faith? In what metaphor does he involve them in an effort to encourage the reader?

2. What does he instruct the running Christian to cast off? How is this achieved (Matthew 5:29-30, First Corinthians 15:33, Second Corinthians 2:11, James 4:7-10)?

3. What element of godly character is so necessary to achieving victory (First John 5:4, First Corinthians 9:24-27)?

4. Who is our ultimate example of perseverance? What did he endure? To what point might we be required to persevere (Revelation 2:10)?

5. When is disobedience to God justifiable? What kinds of excuses do Christians sometimes make for failure? Is apostasy possible (Second Timothy 4:10, First Corinthians 10:1-12)?

## *Lesson 23: Whom The Lord Loves, He Chastens*

The original audience for the book of Hebrews was enduring terrible persecution even at the hands of their own countrymen and families. They were being buffeted within and without by tempters and skeptics, eager to see the saints recant their faith in Jesus. They were striving against sin and near to becoming weary and discouraged. To repair their perspective and prepare them to endure, the writer begs them to see their travails as the chastening of the Lord upon children whom he loves and must discipline.

Hebrews 12:5-11: “And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.’ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

The writer wants his beleaguered readers to understand that God is not causing their trials (James 1:13), but that he is utilizing the wickedness of their neighbors to try their faith and strengthen it in the process (James 2:1-4, First Peter 1:6-9). Any loving father prepares and allows his children to face difficult challenges like spelling tests, batting with two strikes and dealing with a bully. The trials of youth make men and women and the tests of faith make for mature Christians. A loving, heavenly father likewise chastens his children so that they might achieve righteousness and greater mettle (Hebrews 5:14). And it’s no different today.

1. Read First John 3:1-3. What relationship to God do we bear? What benefits are attached to that relationship (Matthew 7:7-11, Hebrews 11:6, James 1:16-18)?

2. What is the other blessing the writer discusses in Hebrews 12:5-11? How does God administer this blessing?

- First Peter 1:6-9:
- Second Timothy 3:16-17:
- Hebrews 10:32-39:
- James 1:12-15:
- Second Corinthians 12:1-10:
- First Corinthians 11:27-32:
- First Corinthians 10:13:

3. How do we become “partakers of his holiness” (Philippians 2:1-11, Second Peter 1:1-11, First Peter 1:13-16)?

4. How did God chasten Abraham (Genesis 22:1-19)?

5. What is chastening supposed to yield (Philippians 4:4-9, James 3:13-18)? Does it always?

## *Lesson 24: Lest You Be Like Esau*

Many names are missing from the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11 but only one of them gains the dishonor of appearing as a negative example in chapter 12. It is Jacob's brother, Esau, a "profane person ... who for one morsel of food sold his birthright" (16).

Bible students will recall the origin of this warning from Genesis 25:29-34. Jacob had cooked a savory stew that filled the nostrils, if not the stomach, of his brother Esau. When Esau begged for sustenance, Jacob was only too happy to oblige, provided his brother would sell him his birthright as firstborn son. Therefore, Esau despised his more valuable birthright and exchanged it for some bread and a bowl of lentil stew.

Impose that tale upon what we have seen in Hebrews 11—stories of great faith that overcame impressive challenges to persevere and prosper. The Hebrew Christian audience of this book was wavering between faith in Christ and recantation because of intense persecution at the hands of countrymen and family alike. The question is forced upon them daily—would they persevere like Jacob (11:21) or sell out like Esau?

Esau enjoyed a birthright as firstborn son, but he suffered from a carnal mindset foreseen in prophecy (Genesis 25:19-28). His birthright might have included parcels of land and earthly wealth, but the inheritance these Christians—and we—anticipate is of greater value. It is a new heavens and earth and treasure stored up in mansions beyond the clouds (First Peter 1:4). If Esau, however, could abandon his birthright, so can the careless Christian (Hebrews 6:4-6, Second Peter 2:20-22).

As Esau found no place for repentance, so the Day of Judgment will be too late for the careless Christian who sold his inheritance to buy a stew of luxury, convenience or freedom from persecution (see Hebrews 9:27-28, Second Corinthians 5:9-11). Such a one has fallen from grace more severely than when Esau was told it was too late.

1. Read Hebrews 12:12-13. What are some practical ways to accomplish this restoration (Isaiah 35:3-4, Proverbs 4:20-27, Psalm 5:7-8, First Thessalonians 5:14, Revelation 2:5, 3:3)?

2. Read Hebrews 12:14-15. What are our two pursuits? How can they sometimes be seen as in conflict (First Corinthians 5:1-2)? How do we reconcile them then (Romans 14:16-19, 22; First Corinthians 11:16)?

3. What is involved in “looking carefully” (Romans 13:11-14, Ephesians 5:8-17, First Peter 5:8)? What are we trying to avoid?

4. What attitudes caused Esau to sell his birthright? What is the Christian’s birthright (Luke 12:32, Second Peter 1:10-11, First Peter 1:3-4)? Can it be sold away? How?

5. When does it become too late to regain that birthright (Hebrews 9:27-28, Second Corinthians 5:9-11)?

## *Lesson 25: Do Not Refuse Him*

As we conclude this series on Character from Hebrews 11-12, we discover the bottom line is that maintaining good character depends upon hearing and heeding the word of God.

As awesome as the sight of Moses descending from Mount Zion amidst smoke and thunder must have been, the voice of God through Jesus and Spirit-inspired writers should prove even more binding and magnificent (Hebrews 12:18-24). That was the message throughout Hebrews. “God who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his son .... Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away” (Hebrews 1:1-2, 2:1).

True character is not defined and determined by evolving human standards and it is certainly not developed despite ignorance of the word of God. Naturally, Christians should be devoted to partaking of the divine nature so that their character is marked by virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and, above all, love (Second Peter 1:2-8, Colossians 3:14).

Godly character cannot be developed where reverence for the word is absent. Claiming to abide in Christ as his disciple mandates that we strive “to walk just as he walked” (First John 2:6). When we mar our character with moments of dishonesty, shortsightedness or selfishness, we are doing something worse than just pursuing self. We are denying Christ—practically, if not verbally. “They profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work” (Titus 1:16).

Character can be developed by ingesting the sweet direction of the New Testament and by pursuing its noble ideals, even and especially when the immediate consequences are somewhat bitter. Admitting mistakes, righting wrongs, suffering loss, standing up, sometimes being knocked down.

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29). That grace is the favor of God and even with diligently tended character, it will be an undeserved blessing.

1. Read Hebrews 12:18-24. How did Israel react at the original Mount Zion (Exodus 20:18-26)? What is good and bad about their response?
2. What makes our Mount Zion better? In comparison with the Hebrews, what should be our character as we approach it (Hebrews 4:14-16, Matthew 7:21-27, First John 2:1-6)?
3. Consider Hebrews 12:25-29. Summarize the kind of character that God is seeking (Luke 6:46, John 15:14, Hebrews 2:1-4).
4. How is character developed (Colossians 3:12-17, Romans 5:1-5, Second Peter 3:18, First Corinthians 11:1)?
5. When character fails, one learns that God is a consuming fire. What does this mean (Matthew 3:10, 5:22, 13:44-52; Hebrews 9:27-28, 10:31)?

## *Lesson 26: Review (2)*

1. How did the apostles respond to pressure by authorities to sin (Acts 4:19-20, 5:29)? Some Jewish rulers (John 12:42)? Why? What is the point (Matthew 10:32-39, Titus 1:16)?
2. Explain the meaning of Ephesians 6:1-4. What is the nurture and admonition of Christ? What kinds of things try to overturn this arrangement? What helps (Proverbs 22:6,15)?
3. What sacrifices might a Christian make today in suffering the reproach of Christ (Philippians 2:1-18)?
4. Moses was able to commune with an invisible God. Define communion. How do Christians commune with God today (Psalm 55:1-3, 16-22; Philippians 4:9, First Timothy 4:15; First Corinthians 11:23-34; Ephesians 5:19)?
5. What were the threats in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:18-23)? How does the pilgrims' example teach us about trust today (First Corinthians 10:1-13)?

6. Implicit belief is an absolute faith without qualification or reservation. How is it challenged or displayed in times of prayer and need (Matthew 14:22-23, James 1:2-8, First John 5:14-15)?
7. How can one tell that true faith is “out of season” (Second Timothy 4:1-5)? What does this mean?
8. What did Paul say about persecution (Romans 8:31-39, Second Timothy 3:12)?
9. What does the writer instruct the running Christian to cast off (Hebrews 12:1-2)? How is this achieved (Matthew 5:29-30, First Corinthians 15:33, Second Corinthians 2:11, James 4:7-10)?
10. What is chastening supposed to yield (Philippians 4:4-9, James 3:13-18)? Does it always? Why or why not?
11. What attitudes caused Esau to sell his birthright? What is the Christian’s birthright (Luke 12:32, Second Peter 1:10-11, First Peter 1:3-4)? Can it be sold away?







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