

“The Character of Faith”

Hebrews 11: 1-40

1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

4 By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. 5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. 7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered himself faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so, from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18

even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

21 By Faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

22 By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.

23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. 25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. 26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after the people had marched around them for seven days.

31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – 38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. 40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (NIV)

[NOTE 1] Just as 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the “love”-chapter so today’s text is known as the “faith”-chapter. The author gives us a brief definition and then spends the rest of the chapter showing us what FAITH looks like when applied to life through many examples. The sheer weight of the witness and its dynamic and unforgettable definition of faith penetrate to the very core of the modern heart. We cannot separate this chapter from the one before it though as we are tempted to. Our faith is based upon the perfect and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus. It is that sacrifice completed once for all time and for all people, which opens for us a way into the very presence of God in whose presence we can enter with holy boldness, free of all fear of holy retribution, utterly confident of the forgiveness in the face of God. Those who approach God can do so in full confidence that He exists, that His word is true, and that He will never put off or disappoint the person who sincerely seeks Him. For ALL that God has revealed of Himself, whether through the prophets or in His Son Jesus, assures us that He is altogether worthy of our trust. Listen to this excerpt from a poem by Joseph Hart: “The God who created the skies, the strength and support of His saints, Who gives them all needful supplies, and hearkens to all their complaints: This this is the God we adore, Our faithful unchangeable Friend, Whose love is as large as His power and neither knows measure nor end.” **[NOTE 2]**

These heroes of faith have one thing in common: they put their undivided confidence and trust in God. Because of their faith these people shine as examples to us all of endurance, perseverance, and courage. Hear the echo of the phrase, “By Faith!” In spite of their failings as people, despite their trials and difficult circumstances, they triumphed because of their trust in God. For the author faith is adhering to the promises of God, depending on the Word of God, and remaining faithful to the Son of God. Faith is a powerful force, a well of refreshment, a stable foundation of confidence upon which these saints stood in every circumstance of life.

[NOTE 3] The Heidelberg Catechism defines true faith this way: “True faith is created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel – it is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything that God reveals in His Word is true, but also a deep rooted assurance that not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven,

have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation. These are gifts of sheer grace earned for us by Christ.” (Q & A 21).

To the author of Hebrews, faith is absolutely certain that what it believes is true and what it expects will come. The original language indicates that faith is the substance of life. That means that it is foundational. It is the standing pillar upon which other stones are placed. This faith is not an imaginary product of the mind, somehow fabricated out of some philosophical or **[NOTE 4]** psychological need, but that which is firm, solid, and of real substance. Faith is the solid certainty of that for which we hope, based upon reality and solid existence. God’s promises give us a sure hope. When I have certainty, When I am sure of something it becomes the foundation of my actions. Faith happens when certainty prevails even though the evidence is lacking. The author ties faith to hope and obedience at different places in this chapter.

Faith radiates from our inner being, where hope resides. The hope that Hebrews talks of is not an inactive, hidden quality. Hope is active and progressive and relates to all the things God has promised to believers. It is sure and certain. It is not the hope which looks forward with wistful longing; it is the hope that looks forward with utter conviction. The Christian hope, i.e. faith, is such that it dictates all of a person’s conduct. You live in it and you die in it; and it is the possession of the hope and/or faith that makes us act as we do. Faith is being sure of what God has promised about the future. It is a belief in the future against the present, it is the belief in God against the world, and it is the belief in the Holy Spirit against the feelings of our senses. An example of this would be certainty that God is faithful and never leaves us even though it feels like He has abandoned us because we are going through a difficult time. Faith believes that God is there whether it feels like it or not. Faith is the solid certainty of that for which we hope, based upon reality and solid substance—God’s promises equal a sure hope! Faith is based upon that which is tested and crucial. And what is it that is unseen but is yet tested and important; is it not the power of God working through God’s management of all events in history? This power may be unseen for awhile, perhaps, but we come to know it as ultimate and crucial, dependable, solid, and foundational. Our faith is based upon the reality of God’s power. It is fairly simple. Now let’s go back to Hebrews 11 specifically.

I like the way the Today’s English Version translates this chapter a lot and here are some things in the translation of this passage that help to shed some light on the subject. First in verse 2, the NIV reads: “This is what the ancients were commended for.” The TEV reads: “It was by their faith that people of ancient

times won God's approval." See what I mean? That makes the meaning of verse easier to understand. The TEV also clarifies verse three where it reads: "What can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen." Then in verse 4, the NIV reads: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead." The TEV translates it: "through his faith Abel won God's approval as a righteous man. ...even though Abel is now dead, his faith still speaks for him." That makes a little more sense doesn't it? It just makes the meaning more clear. Now look at verse 33. The NIV reads "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised," the TEV reads, "through faith they fought whole countries and won. They did what was right and received what God had promised." Here, it not so much an issue of being more clear as that of adding to the meaning. Finally in verse 37, the second part leading in the first part of verse 38, the Contemporary English Version brings the facts together a little more concisely when instead of saying, "They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. 38 The world was not worthy of them, the CEV reads "Some had nothing but sheepskins or goatskins to wear. They were poor, mistreated, and tortured. The world did not deserve these good people." **[NOTE 5]**

Faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world: this was no doubt one of the lessons of this chapter. But it does definitely carry with it great reward in the only world that ultimately matters. The Kingdom of God.

I spoke earlier of how the author links faith and obedience. Look at Noah and Abraham. They exhibited obedience that went beyond or even contradicted, common sense. They were so confident in the promises of God that even if what God asked them to do made no sense and seemed almost ridiculous, they did not question but moved forward anyway. It says, Abraham packed up and left, WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING WHERE HE WAS GOING. Picture a large flat area in the middle of a very dry almost desert like area. Now picture a man starting to build a humongous boat in the middle of nowhere with no way to move it. Sounds almost crazy. But that's what Noah did. Through Noah's faith he put the whole world in the wrong. These people took God at His word. They walked by faith not by sight. Obedience is the outward evidence of inward faith. **[NOTE 6]**

That is why Abraham could take his son up the mountain to be sacrificed. He knew that God has promised him a line of heirs and this through Isaac, so even if God chose to have him kill Isaac then God must be planning to resurrect him.

Abraham had no doubts that God would keep His promises and that He would provide. Without faith in a God who created the world with order; without faith in a God who provides for His children whom He loves; without faith in a God who loves justice and hates lawlessness; without faith in a God who makes a way, the only way, into the sanctuary of His presence, without such faith it is impossible to please a God who desires and demands that we believe these things. It is impossible to please God outside of faith. The only way to “walk with God/walk in faith” is to be sensitive to the mind of God and obedient to the mind and will of God.

[NOTE 7] The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob honored God by taking Him at His Word and putting their faith in Him; God honored them by calling Himself the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. What higher honor than this could be paid to any mortal? These three patriarchs were by no means faultless, but God was not ashamed to be called their God because they took Him at his Word. Without faith, not even Enoch, could please God. Take God at His Word. Believe in His promises. Take time to read and think on God’s promises and believe. Trust in the One who created you. Have faith in the sure hope of God’s Word, and then obey.

Let’s pray ... Dear Lord God, heavenly Father. You are worthy of our praise. You are worthy of our trust. Thank you for giving us the sure hope of eternal life with You. It is so comforting to know that we win in the end, no matter what the circumstances of our lives, we can claim Your love, Your care, Your forgiveness, Your Holy Spirit, Your wisdom. Lord, help us in our unbelief. Make us strong. Give us courage. Lord may we be known as people of faith. We ask this in the name of Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “The Character of Faith” based on Hebrews 11
given in Doster February 26, 2023

- I. Hebrews Chapter 11 is “the faith chapter” just as 1 Corinthians 13 is “the love chapter”. Our faith is based upon the perfect and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus.
- II. These heroes of faith have one thing in common: they put their undivided confidence and trust in God. Because of their faith these people shine as examples to us all of endurance, perseverance, and courage.

- III. The Heidelberg Catechism defines true faith this way: “True faith is created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel – it is not only a knowledge and conviction that everything that God reveals in His Word is true, but also a deep rooted assurance that not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation. These are gifts of sheer grace earned for us by Christ.” (Q & A 21).
- IV. Faith is the solid certainty of that for which we hope, based upon reality and solid existence. God’s promises give us a sure hope. When I have certainty, When I am sure of something it becomes the foundation of my actions. Faith happens when certainty prevails even though the evidence is lacking. The author ties faith to hope and obedience at different places in this chapter.
- V. Faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world: this was no doubt one of the lessons of this chapter. But it does definitely carry with it great reward in the only world that ultimately matters. The Kingdom of God.
- VI. Obedience is the outward evidence of inward faith. The only way to “walk with God/walk in faith” is to be sensitive to the mind of God and obedient to the mind and will of God.
- VII. What are you going to do about it? Please write an “I will - _____ statement about what you will do this week to trust and obey and walk in faith.