

Hebrews Chapter Eleven

In chapter eleven we are told that new believers in Christ have a better system of faith than what was available under the Old Covenant. The faith of the individuals mentioned in this chapter led them to stunning victories, but they looked forward to something better, something we possess today through Jesus.

By faith we understand (verses 1-3)

Faith is defined for us in these verses. It is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. This is contradictory to our contemporary society which insists upon a scientific understanding of everything. It is very difficult for some people to believe in God whom they have never seen, heard, or touched. Yet, it is this aspect of faith that God requires.

The Apostles of Jesus, who were with Him for a period of at least three years, still asked, “Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). Paul tells us that our faith finds its origin in the Word of God (Romans 10:17) and that we walk by faith, not sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Paul goes further in Galatians 5:6 to tell us that nothing exceeds faith working through love and John tells us that our victory comes through faith (1 John 5:4). Through faith the elders received a good report, that is, the individuals mentioned in this chapter are mentioned because of their faith, in like manner as our faith should be known today (Romans 1:8).

An interesting side note is the inclusion of the beginning of the world. As Christians we understand that God created the heavens and the Earth. This is unacceptable to many scientifically minded people in our time. Yet, it makes more sense to believe that God created the Earth than to believe that it just happened by chance. The

writer of Hebrews reaffirms creation. We have a choice to make whether to believe that God is responsible or to believe that the universe was just an accident. Faith tells us that God made all things whether we can prove it scientifically or not.

Faith in the beginning (verses 4-7)

The first example given by the writer is that of Abel. Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain through faith (Genesis 4:3-5). His faith also resulted in God testifying that he was righteous and this also allows him to continue to speak to us today.

The next example is Enoch. Enoch was a unique individual in that he did not die. God took him directly to heaven (Genesis 5:24). While all of us will die unless Jesus comes first, Enoch walked with God and God was pleased with his faith.

At this point the writer describes the necessity of faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Jesus tells us that this is the work God would have us do (John 6:29). We must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek after Him. This must be understood in the context of creation. Those who ascribe the origin of our universe to chance are denying the fact that God is. Once again faith is emphasized, even if we cannot create a scientific experiment to prove that He exists.

Noah is the final example of faith prior to the flood. He was warned by God of things not seen. Noah had never seen a flood before, yet he believed God was going to cause one and moved with godly fear resulting in the building of an Ark. Everything that Noah did was in faith (Genesis 6:9-12, 14).

The faith of Abraham (verses 8-12)

The story of Abraham is found in several places (Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 15:1-6). The promises God made to Abraham were received in faith. He went out from

his homeland not knowing where God was leading him. He dwelt in tents with his family instead of living in a comfortable residence because of faith. His son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob also lived in tents and wandered because of their faith. As the writer tells us, “he waited for a city built by God”. His wife, Sarah, is also mentioned as an example of faith. Even though she was well past the age of normal conception and childbirth, she was able to conceive and bear a son, all because of faith (Genesis 21:1-7).

The heavenly hope (verses 13-16)

At this point the writer stops to elaborate a little upon these examples of faith. He specifically states that these individuals all died without receiving the promises. Even though they did not receive the promises (that we enjoy), they were still faithful. They saw what would happen in the future and could rest assured that God would carry out what he had promised to them. They sought a homeland. This was not Ur of the Chaldees in the case of Abraham, or Egypt in the case of Moses. If this was the homeland that God had promised them, they knew the way back. No, what God promised was more than a homeland; it was a heavenly country, one that we today are the recipients of.

The faith of the patriarchs (verses 17-22)

Abraham is mentioned again in this section dealing with the command of God to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-4). Even though Abraham had waited for one hundred years to see the promise of God he was willing through faith to sacrifice him. God did not allow him to complete this act, but Abraham’s faith in the ability of God was tested. Verse eighteen comes from Genesis 21:12.

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac. They were both blessed by their father, although Jacob received the greater blessing (Genesis 27:27-29 and Genesis

27:38-40). Jacob also is mentioned as blessing the sons of Joseph (Genesis 48:1-22), although he blessed all of his other sons as well (Genesis 49:1-27). Joseph, Jacob's son prophesied that there would come a time when God would bring His people out of Egypt (Genesis 50:22-26). And, as part of this prophecy, Joseph said that the children of Israel would take his bones with them when they left. This was fulfilled in Exodus 13:19. All of these individuals lived lives of faith.

The faith of Moses (verses 23-29)

From the patriarchs, the writer now turns his attention to the period of Israel as a separate kingdom. These verses illustrate the faith of Moses' parents first. As found in Exodus 2:1-10, the parents of Moses defied the order of Pharaoh to kill all male children. They took care of Moses for three months and then, through the providence of God, devised a plan to save the life of Moses.

Moses became known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and enjoyed a life of leisure and ease. But, as shown in Exodus 2:11-15, Moses reached a point where he did not wish to remain a prince, and fled Egypt. He understood that the pleasures of sin last only for a short while. This is a lesson Christians need to learn today.

Moses returned to Egypt in response to God's command and led the people out of bondage. The focus now shifts from the faith of Moses to the faith of the Hebrew people. By faith they kept the Passover (Exodus 12:1-28) and, in particular, they were faithful in the sprinkling of blood (Exodus 12:21-24). While Moses is given as an example of faith, the faith of the Hebrews is also recalled as they passed through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1-29).

Faith to overcome (verses 30-40)

The next example of faith is the defeat of Jericho by the Israelites under the command of Joshua. Jericho was a fortified city with an immense wall. The Israelites had no weapons that would allow them to defeat the city. As shown in Joshua 6:1-24, God commanded that the Israelites march around the city of Jericho once a day for six days and then seven times on the seventh day. When the Israelites were faithful to do this, the walls of Jericho fell and the city was destroyed.

One of the inhabitants of Jericho was a harlot named Rahab. It is very interesting to note that in this great listing of the faithful, a non-Hebrew makes the list. Rahab is included because she protected and aided the spies sent by Joshua to Jericho (Joshua 2:1-21). In response to her faithfulness she and her family were spared when the city was destroyed. This was made possible because she placed a scarlet rope in the window of her house as commanded by the spies. Rahab is also mentioned in James 2:25.

The exploits of Gideon are mentioned next. Gideon led a small band of Israelites to a great victory (Judges 7:1-22). Barak, a commander under Deborah is also mentioned (Judges 5:15), along with Samson (Judges 16:28) and Jephthah (Judges 11:1-40). These names were all familiar to Jewish people, indeed they are familiar for the most part to us today.

At this point the writer asks a rhetorical question, “And what more shall I say?” (verse 32). It seems as if the writer is tiring of writing about all of these heroes of the faith. He seems to know that his readers are very well familiar with the examples he has given. Almost in exasperation, the writer says that “time would fail me” to make mention

of all those who should be mentioned. Just notice the listing of those who are only mentioned briefly by name: David, Samuel, and the prophets.

The next several verses describe what these people were able to do through faith. By faith they subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions (like Daniel), quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, were valiant in battle, turned armies of enemies to flight, and women received their dead to life again (Elijah raised the widow's son in 1 Kings 17:22).

Then the writer lists those things that they endured through faith. By faith they were tortured, mocked and scourged, chained and imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, tempted, slain with the sword, wandered in animal skins, were destitute, afflicted, tormented, wandered in deserts and mountains, lived in the caves and dens of the Earth.

The writer sums all these things up when he says, "of whom the world was not worthy" (verse 38). Christians today should strive to have this description applied to them as well. These great heroes of the faith from the Old Testament were not perfect. They were not sinless. David, who is listed, was an adulterer and a murderer, yet he is also known as the man after God's own heart. The reason he is known is because of his great faith. Indeed, all of these individuals are included because they trusted in God.

As a result they obtained a good testimony by faith. But, they did not receive the promises. They could only look ahead to that time when God would send His Son into the world. We, in this present time, have what these heroes of the faith longed for. We have the promise. We have Jesus! God has provided something better for us.

