

SCRIPTURE  SHARED



Jesus: Greater Than

a study of Hebrews

Week 3: Faith

Day 1: Faith Based on Trust

Hebrews 11:1-3

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Understanding the Passage:

We are aware of the world around us through our five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing. We use our senses as litmus tests for determining whether something is real or not. But that doesn't work for God. We can't prove God's existence by smelling God or touching God.

It is not our senses but our faith that assures us of what we cannot see. Even non-Christ followers practice faith: for instance, they get on elevators without checking the cables. Faith is what connects what we cannot see with our understanding.

The Greek word in verse 1 translated in the NRSV as assurance is *hupostasis*, which means "to set under" or "to place under." The concept is of a foundation or something that holds up the rest of the framework. For the author of Hebrews, faith is what undergirds hope. NT Wright defines hope as "looking at the future and trusting God for it" but he says that faith is "looking at God and trusting [God] for everything." Hope is a good thing, but without faith, it has the potential to degenerate into mere optimism. Faith gives our hope reality.

Verse 2 says that it was faith that caused their ancestors to receive approval. Not their actions, nor their hard work and sweat, nor their pious words. In fact, among the ancestors listed in the following passage are a collection of people who made mistakes in their lives -- Noah passed out drunk, Sarah laughed at God, Rahab was a prostitute, Moses and David were murderers, and on and on. But the common denominator in all of their lives was faith in God and God's promises.

Verse 3 takes us back to the creation stories in which God spoke the world into existence. We are overly familiar with Genesis 1 and 2, to the point that the awe of the stories has worn off. But the author of Hebrews wants to remind the people that they aren't putting their faith in a weak or small God; they are putting faith in the God that prepared the world simply through words.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Look up Hebrews 11:1 in various translations on www.biblehub.com. Which of the words for *hupostasis* makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. Have you tried to maintain hope without faith? How did it go?

Day 2: Hall of Faith

Hebrews 11:4-12, 17-38

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

7 By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, 18 of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." 19 He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. 20 By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." 22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though 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 if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Understanding the Passage:

Yesterday's reading set a high bar for faith. How can one really have that much faith in something they've never seen? The author of Hebrews must have been anticipating that pushback as the next passage is a list of real folks with both challenges *and* life-changing faith. The author wants the Hebrews to see that this kind of faith is attainable because their own ancestors had it.

This Hall of Faith is meant to be like a family photo album for the Hebrews. Just like we identify traits of our grandparents and other ancestors when we look at their photos and hear their stories, being reminded of the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others is meant to help the Hebrews see the characteristics of strong faith within their own families and inspire them to a life of great faith as well.

Abraham was able to live by faith (leaving his homeland, trusting he would become a father, sacrifice Isaac) because he believed that God's promises were better than the life he would have lived on his own. Moses gave up a life of power, affluence, and security because he lived by faith. Both of these men faced life-threatening challenges, but remained obedient to God. This can be hard to grasp in today's "prosperity gospel" culture that tells us obedience will be rewarded with financial prosperity in this lifetime. Even if we say we don't believe that, our subconscious questions why we got sick or are struggling when we are so faithful to God. The author's list of the folks in the Hall of Faith help us to understand that faith is distinct from our circumstances. The people the author listed were faithful in a variety of situations - when things were good *and* when things were hard.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. All of these folks in the Hall of Faith were obedient, even when it was hard. Can you think of a time in your life when you have been obedient to God even when it's been hard? What were your temptations? How did you stay faithful?
2. Which part of Abraham's story do you think most illustrates his faithfulness? Why?

Day 3: Faith Beyond Death

Hebrews 11:13-16

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Understanding the Passage:

Abraham made it to the Promised Land, but he lived as a nomad in a tent. Even though God had promised the land to him, Abraham had to purchase a plot to bury his wife Sarah. It was many years later that Canaan was given to the Jews. He was also promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore, but it would be many centuries after his death before that promise was realized as well.

Part of faith is being willing to wait patiently based on God's promises even when none of the signs around us are pointing to fulfillment. We like evidence and proof and hard facts.

Yet this scripture passage says that Abraham and the others (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel) saw the promises from a distance and greeted them. How did they see and welcome the fulfillment of the promises? Through the assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things unseen: faith. Their assurance and conviction meant that even though they hadn't actually been given the land or seen all of their descendants, it was as real to them as if they had.

Incredibly, all of those folks died on the other side of the cross. They didn't see the incarnation of God in Jesus or the resurrection. Our faith is shaped not only by the promises God made to the Israelites and the patriarchs, but by the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How much more then should we trust in the promises of what is waiting for us in the heavenly country?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Think back on a time when you've had to patiently wait on God. What was it like? What did your prayer life look like at the time?
2. What is your eternal perspective? How does that shape how you live now?

Day 4: Jesus is the Perfecter of Our Faith

Hebrews 12:1-3

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Understanding the Passage:

The Christian race is not a sprint; it is a marathon. Ancient marathons often ended in stadiums in which folks were gathered to cheer on those who completed the race. The

author of Hebrews alludes to this with the reference to the “great cloud of witnesses” that surround us. Also in the stadium was the team captain, who would wait there to encourage and cheer on each of the runners as they completed the race. The word for pioneer is *archegos* in Greek, which means trailblazer, and was the word used to describe that team captain. Jesus is our team captain that goes before us and then turns to greet us and cheer us on.

This passage outlines three keys to running the race with success:

1. Cast off the heavy weights that slow us down. When runners compete in races, they wear and carry the bare minimum of what they need to get through the race. They know that anything extra will slow them down. In the same way, we need to evaluate all of the extra weight we are carrying in our Christian faith. Do we have self-imposed unrealistic expectations that we are trying to live up to? Do we have shame from our past? Have we repented for sin and accepted God’s forgiveness and grace?
2. Run with perseverance. We are told to consider Jesus who endured hostility so that we are encouraged not to grow weary or lose heart. We cannot conjure endurance on our own; it’s only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can run with the perseverance needed for the race.
3. Look at Jesus. Eyes on the prize. Jesus went before us, paving the way as the pioneer of our faith. It is easy to get distracted by the things around us. Some of us may see others running the race well and start focusing on them instead of Jesus; running the race is not meant to be competitive. We are each running our own race.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are the weights you’re carrying? Read Matthew 11:28. Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you carry those things.
2. What are the things that distract you from focusing on Jesus in your race?

Day 5: Two Warnings

Hebrews 12:12-17, 25-29

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. 16 See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Understanding the Passage:

These are the final warnings in the book of Hebrews. The first passage brings together a quote from Job's friend Eliphaz the Temanite in which he praises Job for helping others as well as instructions from the Proverbs:

Job 4:3-4

- 3 See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.*
*4 Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.*

Proverbs 3:5-6

- 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*
*6 In all your ways acknowledge Him,
and He will make your paths straight.*

Just a few chapters ago, the author encouraged them to keep meeting together and provoking one another to love and good works. One of the responsibilities of Christian community is that we lift one another up and strengthen others who are weak. It is also our responsibility to point out, with love and grace, when someone has strayed from the straight paths of the Lord.

The point of this is to keep people from being "put out of joint." If you use a weak hand or walk on uneven, rocky paths, you're bound to end up with an injury. It's harder to come back from an injury than to develop strength, so the author of Hebrews wants to get ahead of the potential problem by encouraging the community to watch out for each other. The warning is that if they don't, they will experience spiritual ruin and end up much like Esau who was so weak that he traded a bowl of soup to assuage his hunger for his whole birthright. He wasn't just physically weak, but he was morally and spiritually weak as well.

In the second warning, the author says God will shake heaven and earth "so that what cannot be shaken may remain." Jesus tells us in Luke 21:33 what it is that will remain: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." The author wants to remind the Hebrews that if they're building their faith - their foundation - on something other than Jesus, that it will be destroyed.

The saying, "Practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent" applies here. If get into the habit of putting our faith in worldly things - our finances, our careers, our own power, even our families - then we'll end up digging a hole for ourselves that is hard to climb out of. We'll be so ensconced in the faith of our own making that we cannot see what we are missing. We need to do a gut check and evaluate where our words and actions indicate we are putting our faith.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What is the parallel between a physical injury like the author describes in verse 13 and 14 and a spiritual injury from weakness and crooked paths?
2. Spend some time in prayer asking God to shine a light on the things you're putting your faith in. Are there things that you've put above Jesus? Ask God to help you reorder your priorities.

Video Questions:

1. Which part of this week's reading was the most meaningful to you? Which part did you find confusing? Discuss with your group.
2. What is your definition of faith?
3. Does it feel riskier to live by faith or to try to control everything on your own? Why?
4. Do you generally want to see proof for everything or are you comfortable trusting what you cannot see?
5. How does your faith propel you forward?
6. Who are the people in your "hall of faith" that have shaped and inspired your faith? How would your faith look different without them?
7. What inspiration do you get from the faithful folks that have gone before you?
8. Dr. Pace said he gains inspiration from the model that Jesus offers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Which passage about Jesus do you find most helpful in patterning your life after his?
9. What glimpses of God's promises do you see now?