

DAY 7: THOSE WHO EXERCISE FAITH, PART 1

Hebrews 11:1-22

THE MEANING OF FAITH Faith is portrayed in this chapter as a firm belief that God will carry out His promises in spite of seemingly contrary circumstances. The emphasis of faith is not on the internal attitude of the people mentioned but on their active response to God's truth. Faith gives us an inner assurance that the unseen world and unrealized promises of God are true. Then, the reality or actual substance of these promises is fulfilled by actions. Faith has its solid basis in God's Word. Our confidence rests on and our actions are motivated by God's authority.

The Creation account in Genesis support this definition. No human witnessed the creation of the world; yet, by faith, we accept the biblical account as fact and reality. God spoke and it was done. Verse 3 indicates that God did not work with previously existing material; rather, by His Word, He created the physical universe. Science can only speculate about the cause or source of all that exists. Various scientific theories about the origin of the universe start with pre-existing substance—a mixture of gases, for example. This is the mystery of "first cause" that makes scientists wonder and that draws Christians to the Word of God.

THINK ABOUT the aspect of faith that trusts in the unseen realities of the past and future. Hope for the future is grounded in the same faith by which the fact of Creation is accepted. That event was unseen, just as the future is unseen. The author's readers had not seen Christ in the flesh, but many witnesses attested to His life, death, and resurrection. Yet these Hebrew believers had personally encountered Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is true of us as well. We do not meet the Lord in His flesh, but the Holy Spirit enables us to see Him with eyes of faith.

MEN OF FAITH BEFORE THE FLOOD More than 15 times in the coming verses, the sentence begins "By faith." In the first example, Abel presents a sacrifice acceptable to God, while his brother Cain does not. The argument is this: Cain somehow resisted God's direction and turned from His revealed will. This is made clear by Genesis 4:7: "*If you do well, will you not be accepted?*" Abel is an example of one whose actions were consistent with his understanding of God. The account in Genesis does not specify how Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's; however, we do see that it is not the ritual of sacrifice that pleases God, but the heart of the giver.

Enoch, because of his faith, was taken to heaven without dying. The author emphasizes, by contrast, that it is impossible to please God without faith. Two beliefs are needed to draw near to God. First, one must believe that "*God exists.*" Second, God "*rewards those who seek Him.*" Here the meaning is not that we seek God to gain a reward. Rather, it is that faith strongly seeks God, believing that He will respond and make Himself known.

Noah proved his faith by building the ark when there was no sign of a coming flood. Noah foresees judgment rather than blessing. His faithful obedience made him willing to risk being misunderstood by others. He based his actions solely on God's warning and command. The statement that he "*in reverent fear constructed an ark*" reveals Noah's attitude of faith. Noah is the earliest person in Scripture to be called *righteous*. The people of Noah's time had the same warnings but did not listen. The darkness of their disbelief and disobedience contrasts sharply with the light of Noah's faith.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH'S FAITH The first evidence of Abraham's great faith is seen when God calls him "*to go out to a place*" He promised to give him. On God's promise alone, Abraham set out for a destination specified only as "*the land that I will show you.*" Confidence in God's word moves us willingly toward unfamiliar experiences. While Abraham's faith kept him steadfast, he did not possess the land God promised him, except for a burial plot. Isaac and Jacob also died without receiving the Promised Land as their own, but they still believed in the promise.

Through Abraham, the author begins teaching of a more permanent city "*whose designer and builder is God.*" The second example of Abraham's faith has to do with God's promise of descendants. Abraham relied on God to keep His promise, and this trust enabled him to



accomplish what was humanly impossible. Despite old age and barrenness, Sarah and Abraham had a son, Isaac. Through Isaac came an abundance of offspring.

FAITH FOR A BETTER COUNTRY The author elaborates further on heaven in verses 13-16. Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants died in faith as they had lived in faith. They were not at home on the earth. Their desires were spiritual. The patriarchs knew God personally and anticipated everlasting fellowship with Him. God rewards those who earnestly seek Him, and so He honors them by calling Himself “*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*” (Exodus 3:6).

THINK ABOUT how God revealed Himself progressively to Israel. He gave the fullest revelation of Himself and life after death through Jesus Christ. People of the Old Testament looked forward to the future, as Psalm 49:15 shows: “*God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me.*” The patriarchs believed that the city prepared for them was a better place than this earth. Because of the Incarnation, we can be certain that we will experience eternal life in heaven.

ANTICIPATING THE PROMISES The author emphasizes Abraham’s unshakable faith in God’s promises as he focuses on the time God ordered Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. When he and Isaac went to the place of sacrifice, Abraham expected to return home with Isaac. He reasoned that if Isaac was sacrificed, God would resurrect him. Figuratively speaking, Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead, for Abraham was holding the knife in midair when he heard the heavenly command to stop.

Isaac accepted the overruling of his own purpose (Genesis 27:33-40) and “*by faith*” bestowed blessings on both sons for their futures. The certainty that God was Lord over all, even the tactics of deception, made Isaac a model of the “*people of old*” who were commended for their faith (Hebrews 11:2).

Jacob (later renamed *Israel*), unlike his father, was neither confused nor deceived when he acted in a way contrary to prevailing social practices. He purposely blessed Joseph’s son Ephraim, though he was younger than his brother Manasseh (Genesis 48:11-20), just as he, the younger son, had been chosen above Esau. Although Jacob’s physical weakness forced him to lean upon a walking stick, his trust in God was strong, and he worshiped Him until he died.

Joseph made his brothers promise to take his bones back to Canaan, even though none of Abraham’s descendants lived in the Promised Land at that time. Joseph’s faith in God withstood separation from his family, slavery in Egypt, years in prison, and eventual honor as Pharaoh’s second-in-command. Neither hardship nor success dimmed his faith in God’s promises.

PERSONALIZE this lesson. We see in this lesson many examples of how faith leads to obedience, which in turn leads to deeper knowledge of God. Just like the men and women in ancient Israel had to get to know God step by step as they moved along in their journeys of faith, so do we. Often we begin our life in Christ with false ideas about God. We might think of Him as distant or overbearing, punitive, or indulging. Like Abraham, every step of faith and obedience opens us up to knowing more of His love, more of His grace, more of His power and mercy. How have your steps of faith and obedience caused your view of God and knowledge of Him to grow?

REVIEW: THOSE WHO EXERCISE FAITH, PART 1

14. Which example of those who lived by faith was most meaningful to you? Why?

15. Describe a time when you had to “*live by faith.*” What is one significant lesson you learned?