

August 25, 2019

MODELS OF FAITHFUL ENDURANCE

Hebrews 11

(22 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

If you were unfamiliar with the Bible and simply began reading through it, one of the things that would stand out to you—no doubt—would be the prominence of faith. Now, if we've been believers for a while this might be so familiar to us that we don't give thought to it. But think for a second about what the Bible says about faith. We're told that we're "justified by faith" (Rom 3:28), that we "walk by faith" (2 Cor 5:7), and that the gospel brings about the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5, 16:26) in our lives. We're commanded to "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12), "live by faith" (Heb 2:4), "have faith," not "shrink back" from that faith, and to endure in faith (Heb 10:39). Clearly faith is of great prominence and importance in the Bible. Without faith we cannot be saved and only those who endure in faith will "preserve their souls" (Heb 10:39), as the author of Hebrews has noted.

But let's take a step back and not make assumptions this morning. Let's ask some basic questions. What is faith? What does it look like to have faith? How is faith manifested in our lives? Those are the questions that are answered in this eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

Now, with a cursory reading of the letter to the Hebrews, it can feel like this chapter just kind of stands on its own. But if you have been following along, especially seeing how the previous section of the book concludes, this makes complete sense. After issuing his final warning against walking away from Jesus, the author ends on a note of encouragement, saying in 10:39, "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." That is, he comforts his readers, suggesting that they will persevere in faith. But this raises a question, doesn't it? What is faith? And how does it work itself out in our lives? And that's where chapter 11 comes in.

Hebrews 11 has been called the faith chapter, and you can see why. The author tells us of the deeds of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, and more, prefacing each story with the phrase "by faith." It goes on and on, and the author notes that he cuts it off early simply for the sake of time. But the goal of this chapter isn't simply to take the reader down memory lane. The goal of this chapter is to tell the reader what faith is and show us what it looks like in the lives of believers. In other words, when we're told to keep walking in faith and we respond, "What exactly does that look like?" the answer is Hebrews 11. Here is example after example of what faith is and what it looks like when it's worked out in our lives.

Therefore, as we look at this chapter this morning, I want us to see those two things: what faith is and what it looks like when it's worked out in our lives. Let's then start with a definition.

A definition of faith

I think we can put together a definition of faith by looking at different pieces of the author's argument over the first seven verses. But I want to put it together in parts.

First, we can say that faith is the confident trust that what is hoped for and unseen will be fulfilled. That's what the author tells us in verse 1. He writes, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That is, it is the confident trust that what you can't now see will indeed become a reality. And we see that throughout these first seven verses. In verse 3 the author tells us that it is only by faith that we understand that the world was created by God out of nothing. I mean, we didn't see it, but we have confident assurance that it happened. And then there's the mention of Noah building an ark because of events the author tells us that were "yet unseen" (v.7), namely, the flood. So, we can say that faith is the confident trust that what you can't now see will indeed become a reality.

But I think we can all see that if this were the complete definition we gave for faith, it could send us in bad directions. After all, how is this different from the man who flies a plane into a building, thinking that if he kills some people as his final act of life, he'll be blessed with eternal life? I mean, that's a confident trust that what he doesn't see will become a reality, isn't it? Or how is this different from the televangelist who tells the paralyzed woman that the only reason she's still in the wheel chair is because she doesn't have faith that she could get out of that chair and walk? When he says that, doesn't he mean by "faith" in that sentence something like "confident trust that what is hoped for and unseen will be fulfilled"? Of course he does. But neither of those things is what the Bible means by faith. So, what makes Christian faith, biblical faith different than either of those examples? We must add more to our definition.

Well, we can add that faith is based on the word and promises of God. In other words, when the Bible speaks of us having faith, it's not talking about simply believing that whatever you want to be true is true or whatever you hope will happen will happen. When the Bible speaks of faith, it is talking about a confident trust that *what God has said* is true and *what he has promised* will be fulfilled. When the author mentions in verse 3 that we all understand that the world was created by the word of God out of nothing, he knows that we believe that not simply because that's what we wanted or hoped would be true. It's what God told us he did. It's what he's communicated to us in his Word. Looking again at verse 7, we see this. I mean, it wasn't just that Noah wanted the earth to be flooded or had a harebrained idea that it might start raining for forty days. No. The text says, "By faith Noah, *being warned by God* concerning events unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household." His faith was a confident trust that what God had said was true and what he'd promised would be fulfilled.

Next, we can note that faith is the means by which we're justified before God. By "justified" I mean declared righteous, approved of, or commended before God. These first seven verses mention this throughout. In verse 2 we read, "For by it [that is, faith] people of old received their commendation." But what does he mean by "commendation"? Well, we can see just a couple of verses later that he means "commended as righteous" before God. We read in verse 4, "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was

commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.” So, faith was the means by which God commended Abel, declaring his righteous in his sight.

Similarly, we are told in verse 7 that Noah “became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” In other words, throughout Scripture, the means by which anyone has been justified before God is not by doing enough good works to merit being labeled “righteous” before him. It’s always been by faith. It is by grace through faith that we are saved the Scripture tells us, and that has always been true.

But let’s add one more piece before we put together our definition. We can also add that faith shows itself in obedience to God. We can draw this from the many examples of individuals throughout these verses, seeing that their confident trust in God’s Word and promises led them to act on that trust, to obey God. But the author makes this clear in verse 6, saying, “And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” Obedience to God is rooted in faith, and faith shows itself in obedience.

In fact, this is so foundationally true that I think it is the truth that upholds the author’s writings about Abel and Enoch. I mean, there’s nothing in Genesis that says that Abel exercised faith, so how does the author know this? He knows it because Abel obeyed God, and all obedience stems from faith.¹ How does he know that Enoch had faith? Because he walked with God, and without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith is always at the root of obedience, and obedience always flows out of faith.

Therefore, we can put our definition together: ***Faith—as the means by which we’re justified before God—is the confident trust that what God has said is true and what he has promised will be fulfilled, leading to obedience in our lives.***

As we work through all of these examples in this chapter, I think you will be able to see these elements throughout. But now let’s ask another question that the rest of the chapter will help us answer: How does faith work itself out in our lives?

How faith works itself out in our lives

Now the reason I’m framing the rest of this chapter in terms of how faith works itself out (or shows itself) in our lives is because though there are numerous examples of faith that the author gives us, listing numerous characters we know and other unnamed characters, I think we can generally group these under three settings that tie these examples together. I’ll say the first one this way:

¹Tom Schreiner writes, “But how does the author of Hebrews see faith when Genesis is silent on the matter? It seems that any act of obedience that pleases God . . . flows from faith.” *Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2015), 344.

Faith trusts and obeys God when things are unseen and seem improbable

In verses 8-22 the author gives us examples and models of faith from Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. And in each case, we're going to see examples of trusting in God and obeying him even when what God had spoken and promised wasn't seen and seemed improbable.

The author begins with the example of Abraham. When God called him in Genesis 12 he told him to go to a place that he would receive as an inheritance. And Abraham went, without even knowing where he was going. More than that, even when God identified the land of Canaan, Abraham never really possessed it in his lifetime and settled down. We read in verse 9, "By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise."

Do you see that? When he went to the land, he never settled there as receiving his inheritance. Neither did his son, Isaac, or grandson, Jacob. They lived like foreigners in the land, living in tents, always on the move. But why didn't Abraham see this as God being untrustworthy or being unwilling to fulfill his promise? The author tells us why. He writes, "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (v. 10).

What's that mean? Here's what it means. At some point Abraham realized that God's promise was much bigger than the land of Canaan. He realized ultimately that Canaan was simply a shadow of a more glorious land and city that God was going to give him—a heavenly city. This is why when you keep reading the OT, you'll notice that Jerusalem begins to be spoken of as a glorious, holy city where all the nations come (Is 11), where God reigns (Is 24:23), and which encompasses the whole world and fills the whole earth with fruit like Eden (Is 27:6). This is why when Paul refers to the promise that God made Abraham, writing in Romans 4:13, he doesn't speak of Abraham being an heir of Canaan but instead says that Abraham was promised that he would be an "heir of the world," the new world, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Now, Abraham never saw that heavenly city. He never experienced the new creation. But he knew that God had promised it. And so every day that he wondered about like a foreigner, living in tents, he kept pressing on with confident trust in God's promise, even when it was unseen and improbable.

Similarly, when God promised Abraham and Sarah descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, though Sarah was old and barren and Abraham was even older and long past the point of producing children, they believed. Why? We're told that Sarah "considered him faithful who had promised" (v. 11). And God did it. Well, kind of. He gave Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, who was miraculously born. But Abraham and Sarah never saw descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But they died, believing that what God had promised he would do.

The author tells us, "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and

exiles on the earth. . . . They [were looking toward] a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (vv. 13, 16).

They believed, even when things were unseen and improbable. And maybe in the craziest example of all in Abraham’s life, when God told him to go kill his own son, offering him up as a sacrifice, Abraham went to do it. He obeyed. Why? The text tell us why. We read in verses 17-19, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

You see, Abraham was so confident that God’s word was true and his promises would be fulfilled that when God said to sacrifice Isaac—the one through whom God was going to provide all of this promised offspring—that he reasoned to himself that God was about to raise Isaac from the dead. He thought, “God’s promises are true, Isaac’s got to live to have children, and God told me to kill him. Well, I guess that means God will raise him from the dead.” That’s what faith looks like. It trusts and obeys when things are unseen and seem improbable. And we see it in Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph too, who all acted in light of the certainty of God’s promises. Faith trusts and obeys even when you don’t see God’s promise fulfilled and it seems like it’s improbable that it would ever happen.

Then, in verses 23-31 we see:

Faith trusts and obeys God in the face of opposition

In verses 23-31 we see examples from the life of Moses and from Rahab, and in each case, we see faith showing itself in trust and obedience to God in the face of opposition. In the case of Moses’ parents, the king had demanded the murder of all Hebrew babies if they were boys. But, by faith, Moses’ parents hid him. Faith in the face of danger. Then Moses, though he had been raised by the king’s daughter and had every right to all the privileges of being her son, walked away from it, identifying with the Jews, knowing the danger that put him in. Why? It is because he believed the promises of God. The text tells us, “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (v. 26).

Now, I’ll tell you, the only way anyone says that he counts reproach better than treasure is if you believe that what God has promised is not only better but is certain. And Moses did. He banked his life on it. Then, they put blood on their doorposts on the night of the Passover and passed through the Red. In each of those events, all the firstborn of the Egyptians died and the army of the Pharaoh drowned in the sea. In other words, this was faith in the midst of danger.

And when you look at Rahab, it was the same. She was a prostitute, living in Jericho, which was an impenetrable city. There’s no way some Israelites could get in, let alone conquer it. But God had promised them that land. So Rahab hid the Israelite spies, risking her life in the process,

because she believed that what God had promised Israel was sure and certain. Faith in the risk of danger.

And finally, we see in verses 32-40:

Faith trusts and obeys as God brings triumphs and tragedies

Starting in verse 32, the author notes that he could go on with more and more examples, but he's got to stop somewhere. He mentions that he could have noted the faith of "Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets."² And then he talks about all the moments of triumph seen by God's people as they obeyed in faith.

They "conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection" (vv. 33-35). We're reminded of Daniel in the lion's den, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, David's mighty men, the women's whose sons Elijah and Elisha brought back from the dead, and on the on. These are stories of triumph, aren't they?

And we could add to the list. No doubt there were moments in your life when you persevered in faith and God triumphantly provided. I can think of missionaries who labored for years and then finally saw a harvest after years of obedient faith.

But triumph is not always promised, is it? We also see tragedy. The author continues, "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (vv. 35-38).

Obedient faith isn't always followed with triumph; sometimes we face tragedy. And on this side of things, we're not always sure which will happen. I've heard the stories of Christian women who prayed for their unbelieving husbands, lived submissively and respectfully with them, and

²We should note that this is an interesting list. Perhaps what first comes to our mind as we read this list is their sin. After Gideon led the Israelites to victory, he led them into sin (Judg 8:24-27). Barak lacked the courage to go to battle without Deborah (Judg 4:8). Samson sinned in numerous ways. Jephthah made a rash vow and sacrificed his own daughter (Judg 11:30-40). David was guilty of adultery and murder. Why put these in this chapter that has been filled with so many encouraging examples? One encouraging answer may be in order to remind us that the call to persevering faith isn't a call to perfection. Even if you're sitting here today thinking, "But I've sinned in the grossest of ways," the Lord can still speak of you as a model of persevering faith, worthy of imitation. Just repent and remember the one who lived, died, and was raised for sinners. Look to him in faith and press on in that faith in the midst of this life, awaiting the day he will say to you, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

saw them come to faith and lead their home in a godly way. I've heard many more where the husband never believed or left his believing wife. Triumph and tragedy. Yet in the face of both possibilities faith trusts and obeys God. And we can obey because we know that our hope isn't in this life only. God has promised eternal life. He's promised resurrection. He's promised a glory that will make all the suffering of this world look like light and momentary affliction, not even worthy of being compared to that glory that we will know.

Brothers and sisters, these Jewish Christians to whom this letter was written were tempted to walk away from Jesus. Most likely they could have avoided persecution in the Roman Empire by leaving Jesus and going back to Judaism. But the author tells them not to shrink back in faith. Walk in obedient faith to Jesus even when you can't see his promises and they feel improbable, even when it seems that you'll face danger if you hold to Jesus, even when you don't know whether triumph or tragedy awaits you. Press on in faith because God is faithful. And if you need to be reminded that others have walked in faith, even in the midst of similar dangers, just read over this chapter again.

Now, I don't know where all of you are this morning. I don't know the setting in which you find yourself. It may feel like the darkness of life is so thick around you that you can't begin to see the promises of God. You may feel confident that there's a much greater chance that tragedy rather than triumph will be yours. But this morning, remember Jesus. That's what the end of the chapter is talking about. In verses 39-40 the author writes, "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." That is, they never got to see what we know to be true. God sent his own Son to live, die, and be raised for us. He sent Jesus as the one who brings to fruition every divine promise. We can have forgiveness of sins because God unites us with his perfectly righteous Son who paid for our sins. And we become heirs of the world because we're one with the one for whom God made everything. In Jesus, God fulfills his promises. So, remember Jesus. Don't turn from him. Press on in faith.

As the author says at the end of the last chapter, I want to say to you this morning: "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:39), and we have a great cloud of witnesses who have modeled what it looks like. May our response this morning be to imitate their enduring obedient faith, knowing that our God is faithful. Amen.