

The writer of Hebrews uses chapter 11 to describe the basis of faith and gives us many examples of people who endured hardship because they believed God. These “heroes of faith” form the “great cloud of witnesses” mentioned in the next chapter (12:1) who testify to us about the value of faith in order to encourage us to place our trust in Jesus Christ despite the suffering that we may have to endure as a result.

In the latter half of the previous chapter, the writer of Hebrews stresses the importance of faith in Christ rather than trusting in the sacrifices that cannot take away sin (Heb. 10:22-39). Those who reject Christ have no other avenue for being cleansed of their sins and are under the judgment of God (Heb. 10:26-31). However, those who have come to Christ through faith have received salvation and will be recipients of the promises of God.

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1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good report.

**“Now faith”** – The writer now focuses on the topic of faith and its benefits in this chapter. He gives us a general definition of faith in this first verse.

**“is the substance [foundation; confidence] of things hoped [trust] for”** – Faith is not merely believing something without any evidence. Faith is believing what God has promised and that is what we base our “hope” on. “Hope” in scripture is not wishing for something that might or might not happen. Instead, it is a trust that God will do what He has promised even if we see no tangible evidence of it yet. Faith is based on our trust in God and our confidence in His integrity and power to do what He said. Faith is the confidence in the things that we trust that God will do because He has promised to do them.

**“the evidence [proof; conviction] of things not seen”** – Our conviction that God keeps His promises does not rely on what we can see with our own eyes. It is confidence in God’s word no matter what the situation looks like.

**“For by it the elders obtained a good report [testimony]”** – Faith gave “the elders” (those who came before us) a good testimony of the goodness of God. The bulk of this chapter is the writer naming person after person who trusted God and obtained salvation through faith. These people are the “great cloud of witnesses” who testify to us of the benefits of faith so that we may also run our life’s race in faith despite the suffering we may have to endure (Heb. 12:1).

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3 Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

**“Through faith we understand”** – The unbeliever reverses this: “Through understanding we have faith.” They say “Prove it to us and we will believe.” This was the attitude of the unbelieving Jews who demanded that Jesus show them a sign to prove His authority. **John 6:30** “They said therefore unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?” Genuine faith trusts God first and then God will give the understanding later.

**“that the worlds [ages; periods of time] were framed [equipped; prepared] by the word of God”** – The writer does not use the word for “worlds” that denotes creation (*kosmos*) but instead uses a word that refers to periods of time (*aion*). Also, instead of speaking of God creating the world, he says that the ages were “framed” (prepared) by the word of God. While it is true that by faith we understand that God created everything merely by speaking the command, the writer seems to be saying that God’s sovereignty extends far beyond merely being the creator. The ages of time have also been prepared by God because He is in control of what happens in this world. It may seem that evil people are in control but God is the One Who lifts up kingdoms and brings them down.

**“so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear”** – Just as God created the universe out of nothing, the events that happen during the various ages of time are not ultimately controlled by the tangible forces that we can see. God is the invisible factor that guides things to go as He pleases. The world may look out of control but faith enables us to understand that God has everything under control and the evil plans of men cannot escape God’s sovereign hand.

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4 By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

**“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent [superior] sacrifice than Cain”** – Scripture isn’t specific about why God was satisfied with Abel’s sacrifice and not Cain’s, and commentators have debated the reason. Some believe it was because Abel’s was a blood sacrifice while others believe it was because he gave the firstlings of his flock (Gen. 4:4). Perhaps both reasons are plausible, but the writer of Hebrews here seems to be emphasizing that Abel’s faith is what made his sacrifice more excellent than Cain’s. Abel’s faith certainly influenced his choice of what to bring to God as a sacrifice.

**“by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts”** – “By which” refers to Abel’s faith. It was Abel’s faith (not his “more excellent sacrifice”) that provided him a witness who would testify that the gifts he gave to God (the sacrifice) were indeed superior. God Himself testified to Abel’s righteousness (which came by faith) by approving his sacrifice.

**“and by it he being dead yet speaketh”** – Abel’s faith still speaks even centuries after his death, for God still testifies to its validity in scripture. It speaks from the “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) that testify that faith is not a foolhardy endeavor in the face of suffering but will be rewarded with eternal life in the end.

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5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

**“By faith Enoch was translated [to move from one place to another] that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him”** – Enoch walked with God, trusting in what revealed to him. Therefore God decided to “translate” him (move him from earth to heaven) without Enoch having to die. He was “not found” because he was no longer on the earth. No one found him walking around and no one found his body (as if he had died) because God had physically removed him from the earth.

**“for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God”** – The reason God decided to translate Enoch is because He was pleased with Enoch. As the writer informs us in the next verse, it was Enoch’s faith that enabled him to please God.

6 But without faith *it is impossible to please him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

**“But without faith it is impossible to please him”** – Faith enabled Enoch to please God and thus be translated, an example of the truth that no one can please God unless they exhibit faith in Him. Faith trusts that what God has said is true and to believe otherwise is to call Him a liar (1 John 5:10 “*He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son*”).

**“for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder [one who pays wages] of them that diligently seek him”** – There are two components to faith that must be present: (1) *we must believe that He is* – that is, that He exists and that He is God, capable of doing what He promised; (2) *that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him* – He rewards those who come to Him in faith by doing all that He promised. Thus faith believes that God (1) is able to do what He promised and (2) is willing to do what He promised.

7 By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.

**“By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house”** – God warned Noah that the flood was coming and instructed him to build the ark. Noah believed what God said and “moved with fear” to build the ark, despite the ridicule he likely endured. Doing so saved the lives of his family.

**“by the which he condemned the world”** – 2 Pet. 2:5 describes Noah as “a preacher of righteousness” so apparently Noah warned those around him of the coming flood while he built the ark. Thus, when the flood came, the world did not perish because of ignorance but because they ignored the warning. Noah’s example of faith condemned the world because they had the opportunity to repent and squandered it. 1 Pet. 3:20 “*Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.*” This condemnation could also be seen in the sense that Noah turned his back on the world in order to follow the path of faith in God.

**“and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith”** – Righteousness can only come through faith. Gen. 15:6 (speaking of Abraham) “*And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.*”

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

God promised to give Abraham and his descendants a land, but did not identify it until Abraham had arrived. Genesis 12:1-2 “*Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.*” Abraham started the journey before knowing where he was going, and by doing so he did not follow the world’s reversed version of v. 3: “through understanding we have faith.” Instead, he trusted God, knowing that understanding would come later.

9 By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as *in* a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: 10 For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.

**“By faith he sojourned [to dwell] in the land of promise, as in a strange [foreign] country”** – One Abraham arrived in the promised land, he did not claim property and build a house. He lived as a nomad, wandering from location to location within the promised land. He didn’t fight those who already lived there but trusted that God would give him the land when the time was right.

**“dwelling in tabernacles [tents] with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise”** – Instead of building houses as permanent dwellings, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in tents as heirs of the same promise that God made to Abraham.

**“For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”** – Abraham did not build a house in the promised land because He trusted that God would fulfill all that He promised. He looked for a city that would be permanent (“which hath foundations”) that is built by God. Abraham understood that he did not have to claim anything for himself because God would fulfill His promises.

**Verses 11-38:** The writer continues to give other OT examples of people who looked beyond their immediate circumstances to the things that God promised would come later. Many had to endure hardships because of their faith and even died before seeing the fulfillment of God’s promises.

39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: 40 God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

**“And these all, having obtained a good report [testimony] through faith, received not the promise”** – Many of the writer’s examples received temporal benefits from their faith, while others died without seeing any benefits. However, all died not receiving “the promise.” That promise is the coming of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) Who would bring the gift of eternal life. Christ had not yet come when these OT saints died and so they had not received the promise.

**“God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect [complete]”** – God was not going to make these OT saints perfect without “us” (those who live after the coming of Christ). He wanted to include all (both OT and NT saints) as recipients of salvation.