

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 37 - Part 2

Hebrews: Faith Cont'd

Most everyone attending a church has heard of the important message of placing one's faith in Jesus. It is the core of becoming a Christian, trusting in the Messiah as one's Lord and Savior. It is something I did as a 12-year-old boy in Lubbock, Texas. But that role of faith in my life did not fully explain a passage I was having to translate in Greek class in 1980 in Nashville, Tennessee.

We were translating Romans 1:17. It reads:

For in it [the gospel], the righteousness of God is revealed *ek pisteōs eis pistin* (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν).

I struggled with this passage. The meaning of the words was fairly simple. *Ek* is the preposition akin to the English "from" or "out of." *Pisteos* is the noun "faith" or "belief" in the form it takes after the preposition *ek*. *Eis* is the preposition like the English "to" or "into." *Pistin* is the same Greek noun "faith" or "belief" in the form it takes after the preposition *en*. It could be fairly literally translated as,

In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed 'from' [or] 'out of' faith 'to' [or] 'into' faith.

I was befuddled a bit. I knew by the "gospel" Paul was referencing the death, burial and resurrection of Christ with its implications for humanity. After all, "gospel" in Greek is "good news," and there is no better news for people than the substitutionary death of Christ! I was also very familiar with 1 Cor. 15 where Paul explained his terminology for the Greek word "gospel." I also understood how the death of Christ as God's means of redemption from my sins revealed his "righteousness." That made full sense to me. If God simply overlooked our sins, it would show him to be loving, but "*unrighteous*."

The whole claim of Paul would have made great sense to me if it simply said, "In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed 'through' faith." But that is not what Paul said.¹

I was really clueless on the idea of faith being from a time to a time, or from a location to a location. Yet those were the words and phrasing Paul was using here.

¹ If Paul had written "through faith" he would have used a different Greek preposition *dia* (διά), like he does in Gal. 2:16; 3:14, 26; Eph. 2:8; 3:12, 27, etc. We didn't have that here either. Here Paul used *ek* (ἐκ) meaning more "out of" or "from" than "through."

Dr. Harvey Floyd gave his insight. He explained the passage as meaning we start the Christian walk by faith, and we sustain it to the end by faith. The Christian walk is properly defined as a life of faith, from the beginning to the end. Paul says as much in the rest of the verse where he adds,

...as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17).

This is a key we must never forget. “Faith” marks out our salvation, but it is only the beginning of a lifetime journey sustained by the same faith in the Lord.

This is the faith that was core to the message of the writer/preacher² of Hebrews. This book’s first audience was Messianic Jews who were talking or thinking of returning to the pre-Jesus Jewish practice of their youth. To these, the writer of Hebrews targeted the book we read in our New Testaments today. It was important to teach the role of faith not only in the salvation process, but in the life that follows that salvation.

In the last lesson we began exploring this call to living by faith in the first half of Hebrews chapter 11. Chapter 11 sets out a number of vignettes of those in the Old Testament who modeled a life of faith in such a way that we should be encouraged and inspired to live our own faith walk.

This week we finish that lesson. The core material is reproduced below, for those who missed the first lesson, and we then pick up with the vignettes not included in the last lesson.

LIVING BY FAITH (HEBREWS 11)

Rather than starting this portion of Hebrews by jumping straight into chapter 11, we should get a running start by considering the final verses of chapter ten. The writer has taken the readers on a journey of confirmation in Jesus as Messiah. Chapter by chapter the readers (listeners) have been given the clear presentation of how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophets’ visions and proclamations of God’s redemptive hand in solving the dilemma of a just God communing with sinful people. The problem as old as Eden was solved through the sacrificial death of God himself, Jesus Christ.

The recipients of this message were urged not to be disheartened as they grew older, but were instead to “live by faith” (Heb. 10:38) and persevere in that faith. In this sense, the writer then turns to the list of the faithful in chapter 11.

² I ascribe to the thought of those scholars who consider Hebrews more of an early church sermon than an actual letter or epistle.

What is “faith”?

We can ask what the Greek word translated “faith” conveys, and readily answer the question. But the writer of Hebrews goes a bit further. The semantic range of the Greek word *pistis* (πίστις) includes “faith,” “trust,” belief,” and “assurance” (or “proof”³). For the writer of Hebrews, “*pistis* - πίστις” (“faith”) is,

the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1).

This is not a scientific proof. Ancients did not think in our modern academic mindset of 2 plus 2 is 4. We might do better to think of it as a temperature. I can tell you on a sweaty day it is “hot” outside. I will dress accordingly too. This is the ancient mindset. Or I can tell you it is 100 degrees Fahrenheit outside. This is scientific and accurate. It can also readily dictate my dress. But it is more the modern mindset if scientific precision is included.

I add this because most people read this idea of “faith” as “assurance” and “conviction” and wonder if they have faith, since no one has really *seen* the invisible God. The writer of Hebrews isn’t fretting this distinction. It is a foreign one to the ancients. The writer is making the point that faith is the drive that motivates our actions and infuses our choices with direction and meaning. It is the *why*, because we believe it so. We have confidence in it.

The writer then begins to motivate the readers and listeners by recounting the faith of a number of historical figures written about in Scripture. We pick up with the vignettes not covered last week, starting with Moses and verse 23, adding a lesson taught in each vignette.

Greek for Geeks

Hebrews chapter 11 has one of history’s classic examples of “anaphora.” This literary and rhetorical technique involves repeating the same phrase or word over and over for effect.

A modern example might be, “I want this made right, right here, and right now.” A classical example is Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, which begins, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

Here the writer begins sections over and over with “*pistei*” (“by faith”). In chapter 11, it is used 19 times in that precise form, 24 times if counting other forms.

The writer is going to great pains to drive the idea into the understanding and memory.

Moses

The section of Hebrews 11 that sets out the faith of Moses contains four different sections promoting faith as a life directive. They begin with his birth and carry through the exodus demarking a life trusting God's presence and power and faithfully living in obedience.

>By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict (Heb. 11:23).

The first "by faith" passage proclaims the importance of parental faith in the lives of children. It was not Moses' faith that put him in the reeds of the Nile to be found by Pharaoh's daughter. It was the faith of Moses' parents.

Exodus 2 tells the story of Moses' birth. It came while Egypt was under an edict to kill male children born into the Israelite homes. But Moses was a "beautiful" child. The writer of Hebrews is using a Greek translation of the Old Testament we commonly call the Septuagint. Translated by Jews in Alexandria, Egypt in the immediate centuries before Christ, the Greek word *asteios* (ἄστειος) is used to translate the Hebrew *tov* (טוב). The Hebrew word conveys "beautiful," but not simply outwardly. *Tov* (טוב) is more typically translated "good," "delightful," or "pleasant."

The point of the vignette seems readily apparent. Living by faith includes how we take care of our children. There is a blessing and a calling to dedicating our children to the Lord. We can be certain that our children will, to some degree, see and measure their faith off the actions and faith of their parents.

Point for Home: I want to live a life that protects and instills faith in my family and friends around me. They will watch me, more than they will listen to me.

>By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward (Heb. 11:24-26).

This is one of my favorite of the "by faith" passages. It is a short vignette, but it is deeply laced with themes of Hebrews, even as it sets out a simple vignette.

Moses had a choice. He could be the grandson of Pharaoh, with all the perks that

would come with the powerful position, or he could follow God in faith and live under duress and hardship with the “people of God.” On its face, the story fits the theme of the chapter showing the historical figures that lived by faith and made a difference because of it. But on a deeper level, this illustration connects with the theme of Hebrews about Jesus as one who was foreshadowed in Moses, yet fulfills the Mosaic type in an eternal manner.

Jesus also had a choice. He was the Son of God, not simply the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, with all the perks and powers that come from being God. He could have maintained that, or he could empty himself and take the form of a human, suffering and enduring hardship to fellowship and redeem the “people of God.”

As the constant encouragement for the Jewish readers to maintain their faith in the Messiah, the writer states that Moses was looking forward to the reward in Christ. As the fulfillment, we see Jesus was looking forward to his reward: redeeming his people. Oh, the power of a loving God!

Point for Home: Do you see the temptation that Moses likely faced? I am confident if I had been him, I would have a real dilemma: Couldn’t I better help the people of God by maximizing my power and influence in Pharaoh’s court. But that was not the calling. God called Moses and he followed in faith. Lord, give me such faith!

>By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible (Heb. 11:27).

This is a marvelous affirmation of faith. Moses did not ultimately leave Egypt because he was running *from* Pharaoh out of fear. Moses left because he was running *to* God!

POINT FOR HOME: I want to run to God. My motivation for life should never be fear, worry, or despair. My motivation is to be running in faith toward my loving God.

>By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them (Heb. 11:28).

Here we read of Moses and the Passover, a core Hebrew holiday/holy day both at the time of Hebrews as well as today. It was the faith of Moses that first instituted the events honored in Passover. Moses was instructed to have the Israelites slaughter a firstborn lamb and smear the blood over their doors and on the door posts. By doing so, they marked out the houses that were spared from the angel of death as it took the firstborn throughout the land.

Here is a real practical lesson for all who were familiar with the Passover. There are real consequences that happen, and with the faithful, the results can be truly life-changing if they follow the Lord faithfully.

PRAYER FOR HOME: Lord, help me to faithfully follow you and your directions for me in life. I want to honor all your ways you set before me.

>*By faith* the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned (Heb. 11:29).

Here is the last Moses vignette.

The Israelites were blocked by the sea, and Pharaoh's army was closing in. I try hard in these stories to place myself, and challenge myself to see where my faith struggle would be. This one is not that hard for me.

We know many there thought about giving up. They wailed at Moses,

Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11-12).

I can see the white flag going up and emissaries chosen to have a meeting with Pharaoh and his generals offering to return into slavery to save the nation, especially the women and children.

The night was closing in, and Pharaoh's army would be upon the people the next day. The time to give up was immediate.

But Moses did not. He was bold in his faith to the people.

And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

After crying out to the Lord, Moses was instructed to stretch out his staff. God sent a wind that overnight divided the sea and dried up the land to allow for passage by the Israelites. During the night, God also set up a barrier to not allow a night time

attack by the Egyptians. The Israelites crossed, Pharaoh's troops were drowned, and faith won the day!

PRAYER FOR HOME: Lord, in times of crisis, let me not give up. Let me learn the lessons and walk faithfully in your deliverance.

Jericho

>By *faith* the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days (Heb. 11:30).

I can't read the story of Jericho without thinking of the elephants in the old Disney animation of *The Jungle Book*. Remember the scene where they are marching through the jungle and you hear one singing, "I love a parade..."

The absurdity of the Jericho story cannot be missed. The Israelites were told to march around the city walls for six consecutive days with seven priests blowing horns. On the seventh day, the Israelites were to march seven times followed by the blowing of trumpets. Then the people were to shout, and they were promised the wall would fall, allowing them to enter and conquer Jericho.

Now who on earth would *ever* believe that would happen? The Israelites looked no more sensible than the elephants marching singing, "I love a parade." Yet the Lord instructed, the Israelites had faith, the Lord was faithful, and the rest is history.

POINT FOR HOME: Do you want to make history? Follow the instructions of the Lord. Even if they don't seem to be what seems normal to folks. God is faithful and will make history.

Rahab

>By *faith* Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies (Heb. 11:31).

Many find the insertion of the Rahab story interesting in light of her occupation. Rahab was a harlot, and the writer of Hebrews makes it clear to the reader. "Rahab the prostitute."

Most scholars recognize "Rahab the prostitute" as the Rahab in Matthew 1:5 set out in the lineage of Boaz. Boaz, of course, was the great-grandfather of King David. The idea of Rahab leaving her pagan origins, committing treason against her city in favor of the Israelites, and surviving and thriving bears witness to a truth for all ages.

God redeems and uses sinners. God is a redemptive God who can take all who in faith submit to his will, and turn their lives into important pieces for the good of his kingdom. Rahab the prostitute was in the lineage of Jesus!

POINT FOR HOME: Sometimes in life one needs to turn a corner. There comes a certain time where one needs to take a life of past sin, and submit it to the Lordship of Jesus. This is not simply a time of saving faith. It is a recurrent time where sins are left behind, and the believer grows in holiness. We never “arrive” in this life, but we grow. Faith fuels the growth. I am looking for those chances to grow.

Gideon, Barak, Samson, and more

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith 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. 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 (Heb. 11:32-38).

Here the writer leaves behind the anaphora style (repeating “by faith”), and starts a long combination list of the faithful. The list includes big and famous stalwarts of the Old Testament (Samuel, David) as well as lesser known and somewhat surprising inclusions (Barak and Jephthah). The list includes a litany of experiences of these faithful. The various events of life through which the faith of these people is shown can be divided into three sections, one flowing into the next without much notice. Reading them, however, one senses the flow.

The events that marked the lives of these faithful begin with amazing events. These are the kinds of events we want! Think of it. Conquering kingdoms, enforcing justice, obtaining promises, stopping the mouths of lions, quenching the power of fire, escaping the edge of the sword. That walk of faith is amazing!

From there the list continues, and moves into things that leave you thinking, “I want that!” Being made strong out of weakness, becoming mighty in war, putting foreign armies to flight, mothers receiving back their dead children by resurrection – these are things anyone would want. Again, it makes the walk of faith sound like

something worth investing in!

Lest anyone think that “with enough faith, you get these amazing and desirous blessings,” the list takes an abrupt turn. If you *really* want a faith walk, then look how the list ends! Being tortured, some refused to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, some chains and imprisonment. Some were stoned, some sawn in two, and some were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. These are not high on most people’s list, but they are in the text.

Then we read some of the most remarkable words about those suffering for their faith. They are those “of whom the world was not worthy.” This is a crazy thought. The world is not ready for those who would so suffer for their faith. This must have come as a great shock and challenge to anyone considering leaving their faith to return to a simpler or more basic life. The challenges of life to the faithful are the opportunities for the faithful to live beyond their humanity. This is the calling to follow Christ!

They didn’t live for the immediate reward. They lived faithfully for the promises of a faithful God.

Conclusion

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-4).

Where does this lesson of faith leave the believer? What final challenge does the preacher/writer of Hebrews issue?

We need to add our names and histories to the list of faith. The faithful have already gone on, but they watch and bear witness to our lives. We can learn from their testimony. We can get serious about faithful living following Jesus who challenged his followers:

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mt. 16:24).

PRAYER FOR HOME: Lord, may I do so. For Jesus’ sake, amen!