

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 37 - Part 1

Hebrews: Faith

I was in high school when my dear friend Kevin Parker challenged me to read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. I wasn't really into the fantasy genre of books, but one day I had a choice in front of me – do my Latin homework or read *The Hobbit*. Open to page one...

I loved *The Hobbit*. I followed with *The Lord of the Rings*, and then read more books in that genre than I can begin to name. The idea of the ring that made one invisible I found profound. Here was a ring that the wearer could slip onto the finger, and suddenly no one could see the wearer. The ring was not without powerful side effects, however. It called out to evil (nameless riders on black horses). It led one to a selfish possessiveness (“My precious...”). It could be used for good, but the wearer was always walking a delicate line and overuse would wear down even the purest of heart.

The analogy still amazes me. What would you do if you could be invisible?

I was in college before I learned from my Greek professor, Dr. Harvey Floyd, the story of Gyges's ring, undoubtedly an inspiration for Tolkien's device. Plato wrote of Gyges in *The Republic*. As the story was related, a shepherd named Gyges found a statue that was revealed after heavy rains created a hole in the earth. On the statue was a gold ring that Gyges took for himself.

Later at a wedding, Gyges was wearing the ring and he discovered by accident that when he rotated the ring a certain direction, it rendered him invisible. If he turned the ring back (“collet away”), then he was again visible. After discovering this power, the shepherd seduced, stole, and murdered along the way to becoming king.

Plato mused that such a ring could be placed on the most virtuous as well as the biggest scoundrel, and with time, their actions would be indistinguishable. Plato saw this as proof that “no one is just of his own will but only from constraint.”¹

Tolkien took this ring and placed it in the possession of one who was virtuous, but even still, it took many in oversight positions and positions of love to keep the wearer from the evil that came from true anonymity.

I have often wondered about the “checks” in my life that keep me balanced. I am thankful I have no such ring, for I have no doubt about my inability to maintain such

¹ This story is found in Plato, *The Republic*, at 359-360. My quotation is from the translation of Shorey, Paul, *Plato Republic Books 1-5*, (Loeb Classical Library vol. 237 1930), at 119-121.

balance by myself. My checks don't involve the wizards, troll, and hobbits of Tolkien's Middle Earth, but they do involve family, friends, and over all, a God who knows me and has called me by name into a relationship with him. This is not a visible God who is a physical buddy, visible cheerleader, or embodied moral policeman. He is a God who is much more than that. He is the God who is responsible for all of nature, yet exists fully outside of nature and this world order. While the world reflects many of his qualities, it is a creation, and does not "hold" God.

My walk with God is one rooted in my belief and conviction that he exists, and that he has truly revealed his character and desires for me and my life. That, in Biblical terms, is "walking by faith." It is a concept that overpowers any selfish desires supplying a true reason for making moral choices. Moral choices are rooted in the desires and will of one much greater than me.

This is the calling of all believers: now, in the past, and in the future. We glimpse into this as we consider the powerful chapter on "faith" found in Hebrews 11. These verses teach and edify us with lessons of how we live by faith in the midst of a world caught up in what is seen. This is part one of a two-part 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.

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”²). 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 will take each one and consider a lesson taught with each.

Abel

>*By faith*, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain...

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. In tribute, I have written multiple anaphoras into this lesson.

² See, e.g., Acts 17:31, “because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance [*pistis*-πίστις] to all by raising him from the dead.” (ESV).

And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks (Heb. 11:4).

Abel speaks to us through his faith, and we get a chance to hear him! What does Abel say? Able teaches us that pure sacrifice to God proceeds from a pure heart. It is not the deed that matters, but the heart that produces the deed.

Genesis 4 gives us the story. Abel was a shepherd, and Cain was a farmer. Cain brought a sacrifice from his work – the “fruit of the ground.” Abel brought one as well, the “firstborn of his flock.” Do we immediately see the difference? A good first century Jew would! Under the Law, Jews were to offer fruit and food, but there were certain offerings that were of “first fruits.”

You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose... (Dt. 26:2).

Abel offered from the “firstborn” and his offering was pleasing to the LORD. Cain’s reaction was one of anger and jealousy. The LORD warned Cain that sin was “crouching” at his door. Of course we know the rest of that story.

The attitude with which one offers sacrifice and obedience to God was the key to this story. Abel’s was one of faith. He gave the first, knowing God would provide the rest. Cain seems to have given from abundance, without regard to providing God the best. The importance of attitude is shown in how Cain responded to God. There is no repentance, no effort at making things right, and no regard for God’s warning of sin.

We learn from Abel’s faith, and we also learn from Cain’s unfaithfulness. The psalmist would later declare,

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise
(Ps. 51:16-17).

Point for home: I am going to try to serve God with my heart, not simply my actions!

Enoch

>By *faith*, Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:5-6).

The message of Enoch? Seek God! Seek to draw close to him. He won't run from you. He won't play hard to get. He won't be repulsed by you. Seek him and you will find him. Draw close to him, and he will not send you away.

We get the story in the book of Genesis chapter 5. Enoch fathered Methuselah at age 65, and then lived a life where he “walked with God,” fathering more children in the process. After a time, Enoch was “not, for God took him.” This is not the typical Hebrew expression for dying. Enoch transitioned to God in a way that is not described in detail.

Many took this to mean that Enoch could come and go as he (or God) chose. So we find in the centuries before and after the New Testament, a fascination with Enoch, with some writings being attributed to him. Hebrews is not concerned with that. The writer of Hebrews is content to see in Enoch a simple truth, by faith we can draw close to God. We can “walk with him.” We can live a life that pleases him.

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in the first century – called the Septuagint – translated this passage of “walking” with God as “living a life pleasing to God.” It is a fair understanding of the passage, and is the translation referenced in the Hebrews passage, where the writer says, “he was commended as having pleased God.”³

To please God *is* to walk with God. Walking with God is an expression of intimacy as it involves walking the direction he walks, directing our steps in holiness, which is pleasing to God. But it is more. It also is what God has made people to do. We are made to be in fellowship and walk with him. That is why he made the way for us to do so in the sacrifice of Jesus. He *desires* to walk with us!

Point for home: I am going to work on my walk with God. I want to be pleasing to him.

³ The Hebrew word for “walk” (*halakh* - הלך) has a semantic range that includes “how you walk” or your conduct. So the Hebrew of Enoch “walked” with God implies how Enoch walked, i.e., his walk was pleasing to God. The Greek word for “walk” (*peripateō* - περιπατέω) however, means simply physical walking.

Noah

>*By faith* Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith (Heb. 11:7).

The example of Noah is a powerful example of one who took God at his word. Period. This enabled Noah to live through the judgment of the world.

Who would have built an ark simply because of an instruction by God? This was not a recreational boat that served a second purpose. It was not for fishing. It was a refuge. It was built because God told Noah to build it. There weren't clouds thundering in the horizon. There was no weather forecast of *el niño* or a hurricane.

I find the lesson simple and profound.

Point for home: I am going to take God at his word. I am going to trust him. I am going to follow his instructions. I rest confident in his provision, regardless of how the earth may shake around me.

Abraham and Sarah

With Abraham and Sarah we have a number of testimonies to his faith listed by our writer. In the midst of these, there is an interlude as well. We will break out each "by faith" testimony for discussion, for each teaches a lesson. We will put the "interlude" in as well.

>*By faith* Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Do you know the old spiritual, "You Gotta Move"? It's been recorded by Mississippi blues legend Fred McDowell as well as rock legends The Rolling Stones. Soul singer Sam Cooke has some of the lyrics engraved on his tombstone:

You may be high, you may be low
You may be rich child, you may be poor
But when the Lord gets ready, you got to move.

This could be Abraham's song! The move by Abraham was stunning by the standards of his day. Moving was not as simple as today. He couldn't just call a moving company (or rent a U-Haul). He couldn't get online and find a new place

to live or rent. It involved a complete uprooting of all he had, a likely recognition he would never again see the family and friends of those left behind. He didn't have hotels along the way where he could stay. No bank was going to hold his savings, lest he encounter thieves along the way. The Lord told him to move, and he moved. Why? Because of faith! He trusted the Lord for his provision. He knew God was instructing him to go, and that was enough.

This is the same attitude Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread" (Mt. 6:11). We follow God today, wherever he leads, trusting God for tomorrow.

Prayer for home: Lord, give us this day our daily bread. Please give us direction for today, strength and faith to follow, and we will rest knowing tomorrow is your responsibility.

>By faith he [Abraham] 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. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

So when the Lord moves us, sometimes he moves us into familiar territory, but sometimes he moves us into foreign land. We wake up and find we are doing things we never knew we could or would do.

Abraham moved from Ur and eventually came into the Promised Land, but even there, he lived like an alien without the stability and security of a city with walls and community life. The first martyr Stephen began his recounting of God's faithfulness as he faced death for his faith in the risen Jesus as Messiah, recounting this from Abraham.

God removed him [Abraham] from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child (Acts 7:4-5).

There is a strong lesson of faith in contentment with the lot we have received from God. Abraham lived faithfully knowing that he was not the master of his own destiny. His job was not to become the center of his universe. His job was to walk in the center of God's will. With that kind of faith came amazing contentment. Paul said it well,

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every

circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Phil. 4:11-13).

Prayer for home: Lord, may my faith inform my circumstances. May I be at peace today simply following and trusting in you.

>*By faith* Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

I LOVE THIS PASSAGE!!! Why? It doesn't seem to belong there! Think about the story of Sarah in Genesis 18. The three angels appear to Abraham and Sarah overhears their prophetic proclamation that barren, over-age Sarah is going to have a son. Sarah *laughs!* The passage does not indicate belief, but incredulity. When God chides Sarah for laughing, she denied it (Gen. 18:12-15).

Sarah stumbles in disbelief, but to the writer of Hebrews, that does not stop her follow-up of faith. Faith is not some shiny object that never tarnishes. It is an object that can fade and mar, but when polished, it becomes powerful and life-changing. It becomes an example for others as well as a foundation for living.

Point for home: When I stumble, where my life shows a lapse for trust in the Lord, I am going to remember Sarah. I am going to live beyond my own limits and live in faith.

INTERLUDE

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. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire 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.

The writer of Hebrews paused the formula of “By faith...” making sure everyone is on the same page. These are examples of people who lived by faith, not sight. They lived in trust for things not received, with the tacit recognition that they belonged to something greater than this life or this world. They belonged to one greater than

their vision. They belonged to God. In that trust, they were fully ready to live for him, knowing it was the life that would be theirs eternally.

With that interlude, we return to Abraham:

>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 (Heb. 11:17-19).

This story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is one of tremendous faith, even though it poses an ethical dilemma for some modern readers. The writer of Hebrews understood Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a monumental example or expression of Abraham’s faith. Abraham had received God’s promises that *through Isaac* God would fulfill his promises to Abraham and humanity. To do that, Isaac would need to be alive and grow to father his own children.

So Abraham may have had no idea how God was going to accomplish his assurance through Isaac, but Abraham had faith God would. It enabled Abraham to tell his workers that both he and Isaac would return from the sacrifice (Gen 22:5 – “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and [we will] come again to you.”)

The modern ethical issue overlooks this faith component. God was not going to let Abraham kill his son, nor was Abraham believing he was truly ending Isaac’s life.⁴

⁴ This is the event that Jesus pointed to two millennia later when he said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (Jn. 8:56). We can see the prophetic element in the storyline. As Abraham and Isaac make their way to the area for the sacrifice, Isaac asked his father where the sacrificial animal was. In a prophetic sense, Abraham offered, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:8). This is ultimately exactly what God did. He was not using the sacrifice of a human father’s son to atone for sins. The sacrifice was of God’s own Son. The lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world is the capital S—Son of the capital F—Father, not the son of the father (“Abraham” means “father of many”). In this sense we understand the prophetic voice of John the Baptist who, upon seeing Christ, proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). When Abraham was about to kill Isaac, an angel of the Lord stopped him and Abraham saw a ram caught in the thicket, which substituted for Isaac. But the ram was not a once-for-all sacrifice. It was merely a foreshadowing substitute for what God would later provide. Another prominent note in the foreshadowing of Christ comes in the fact that the place of sacrifice was secured on the third day (Gen. 22:4). The echo of the “third day” reverberates in the New Testament once the sacrifice of Christ is completed with the resurrection. Once they arrive at the site, the text adds the clause that, “they went both of them together.” This echoes in the ultimate harmony between Father and Son in the sacrifice of Christ. For while “God so loved the world

Point for home: This is a bold call for faith. Abraham was willing to sacrifice everything he had, certainly that which was most dear to him, entrusting God to be there, in full power, and in full control. May I seek to be so trusting.

Isaac

>*By faith* Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau (Heb. 11:20).

Isaac could never be the same after walking through the exercise of his father's faith and commitment to the Lord. Hebrews moves from the event of Isaac's boyhood experience to that of Isaac's end of days, when he pronounced his blessings on his two sons.

The story of Isaac blessing his sons is found in Genesis 27. Isaac blesses Jacob richly, giving him the blessings typically reserved for the firstborn. Blinded in old age, Isaac was tricked into thinking Jacob was his first born Esau. Once Esau came in for his father's blessing, Jacob realized the error. Rather than revoke the blessing, Isaac confirmed the blessing already given, and gave a residual blessing to Esau.

The writer of Hebrews doesn't reference the deception, but goes straight to the faith of Isaac in the blessing. Isaac knew God's promise for the world was coming through his seed. He gave that blessing unknowingly to Jacob, but saw it as God's blessing and did nothing to try and revoke it in favor of Isaac's own preference.

Sometimes we need to set our preferences and plans aside, when God's hand shows us a different preference or direction. God is in charge, and faith says we acknowledge and follow him.

Prayer for Home: Lord, help me discern *your* preferences and *your* direction. Let me have faith to follow.

Jacob

>*By faith* Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff (Heb. 11:21).

Jacob was on his deathbed. He called Joseph and his sons Manasseh and Ephraim to his bedside and he blessed them both. He called on the God of his father and grandfather (Isaac and Abraham) to carry on the family through them, to bless them

that he gave his only begotten Son," Jesus so loved the world that he came! He was faithful and obedient as a Son, "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

and make them great.

Jacob in faith entrusted his family to the Lord. He knew the Lord had been faithful to him, even when Jacob was deceitful and undeserving. God had honored the blessing of Isaac on Jacob, and Jacob was calling on God to bless his grandsons. There is an unmistakable chain worthy of our attention.

Point for home: I want to be part of that chain. I want to trust God with all five of my children. I want to trust God with their children, once they come. I want to deliver unto God the salvation and future of my family, and trust in his blessings on them.

Joseph

By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones (Heb. 11:22).

Joseph was redeemed by God. God gave Joseph prophetic understanding that protected his family in famine, that gave the Pharaoh provision for his country, that enabled Joseph to interpret dreams, and more. God also saw Joseph through enmity with his siblings, through slavery, through imprisonment, and through stresses of high position and authority. Through it all, Joseph kept his eyes faithfully on the Lord.

When Joseph's time to pass drew near, he was emphatic with his offspring, seeing faithfully into the future again. Joseph told them of a day that would come when they would again return to the Promised Land. When they did, Joseph wanted his bones brought out too.

Joseph in faith knew where he belonged. He had lived in Egypt most of his adult life. He had thrived in Egypt. He had brought his family into Egypt. But Egypt was not God's final plan or permanent promise. It was a way station. Joseph knew where he belonged and where his family belonged. Joseph told them, and put in the special instruction to take his bones with them when they returned. It took four hundred years, but God was faithful, and his offspring did as instructed!

Point and prayer for Home: I want to remember where I belong. Life is funny with time. Days are long, but years are short. I never want the funny games of time to play negatively on my faith. Lord, keep me constant in my faith until my final day!

To be Continued...