

## The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

### Hebrews 11

In the previous chapter, the writer exhorted his audience to have faith in the midst of difficult circumstances, and thus to gain endurance. This is in keeping with his primary concern that they were tempted to drift away from Yeshua and to return to Levitical Judaism. Now, he develops this issue further by identifying what it means to be people of faith.

#### The characteristics of faith (11:1-3)

- v. 1 – Since exercising faith is their most important need, he makes sure to define what it is. Arriving at that definition requires breaking down the terms.
- The noun translated as “faith” is *pistis*.
  - The root of this word is a verb (*peitho*) that means to “convince or persuade.”
  - The verb form of *pistis* is *pisteuo*. The vast majority of times (239 out of 248 uses), it is translated as “believe.”

So, to a great extent, the Greek concept of faith is taken from the legal realm. When you have faith, you have been convinced or persuaded that something is true.

We are then given a series of terms that express what convinces us. The first term is *hupostasis*, literally meaning “a setting under.” As shown in 3:14, this word refers to something beneath the surface, like a foundation. It carries the idea of something beneath the surface that determines outward characteristics. So it is has to do with inner nature or substance. Most translations bring that out in a previous usage in 1:3. But here in 11:1, the KJV is the only translation that captures the meaning of *hupostasis* accurately and in a consistent manner with 1:3 by using “substance.” In contrast, the NASB uses “assurance,” the NIV has “being sure” (NIV), and the CJB uses “confident.” Yes, we can have assurance or confidence, but that does not tell you why you can think that way.

We can only have assurance if there is real substance beneath the surface. There is no true assurance if all you have is wishful thinking. So the point is that genuine faith arises from an understanding of something with substance. And, according to the text, it is “the substance of things hoped for.” Believers especially hope for the return of Yeshua, the fulfillment of all of God’s promises, and eternal life. When those things are the substance of your thinking, they produce faith. But things without substance, like a myth, produce no hope and no faith. Knowing if something has substance instead of being a myth is the result of having confidence that it is true. That is brought out in the Hebrew terms for faith and truth, which share a common root (faith is *emunah* and truth is *emet*).

That connection is brought out in the second part of this verse, which says that faith is also the “the evidence” (KJV) or the “conviction (NASB) of things not seen.” The Greek word *elenchos* can be used both ways. You can see how this is a legal term. In a court of law, verdicts decided by a specific process. Physical evidence is presented and witnesses give their testimonies. A judge or jury who was not present when the situation in question took place, hears “evidence of things not seen to them.” But it is not necessary for them to have seen it with their own eyes. The judge or jury evaluates the physical evidence and the testimony of witnesses. And then they make a determination if such things are reliable or faithful. As a result, they can be confident that their conclusion is the correct one. So the evidence enables

you to issue a conviction.

All this to say that faith is not about blindly hoping for the best. It incorporates all of the tangible elements expressed in these terms in their original language, and the context of the passage. In that regard, then, the full definition of faith is being convinced that something has substance and gives us hope, and it is based on evidence and testimony that is true, even if we haven't seen everything ourselves.

- v. 2 – We are then given a description of what faith does. The Greek word translated in this verse as “approval” (NASB), “a good report” (KJV), “commended for” (NIV), or “attested” (CJB) is *martureo*. The word literally means to testify or to bear witness. That is where we get our English word martyr, because people who were killed for believing a certain way would testify or proclaim devotion to their beliefs before dying. Since the great majority of uses of this word in Scripture involves witnessing or giving testimony (including v. 3 of this chapter), it should be considered in the same light here. In that regard, by using the word “attested” here, the CJB uses the most accurate term.

*Martureo* is also used here in the aorist passive tense. That means the emphasis is not on something you do, but something you receive. So another way of stating this verse is: “Because of their faith, people of prior generations received a testimony.” That is what faith does for us—God gives us a testimony or a message to share with other people. So while we do gain God’s approval because of our faith, it is better to take away from the original language that our faith gives us a testimony, just like God did for believers long ago.

- v. 3 – Understanding by faith that the universe was created by the word of God provides an explanation for the ultimate origin that evolutionists can never obtain. Evolutionists can find evidence of a beginning called the Big Bang. And even though it occurred long ago in their calculations, it has no explanation for what preceded it or how and astounding amount of matter and energy could suddenly appear and in an infinitesimally small moment of time begin expanding.

Yet this verse explains it. We are told that the universe was made, thus conveying the concept that it did not exist until God spoke it into existence (*ex nihilo*). Moreover, the universe wasn't made by something you can see, it was made by God. So in keeping with the definition of faith, we have a hope that extends beyond the limits of this planet where we live. The creator of the universe is surely capable of creating everlasting life for those created in His image and likeness. And we have evidence in the form of a testimony in God’s written Word about these things

### **Testimonials of people of faith (11:4-31)**

#### **Abel (v. 4; Gen 4:3-10)**

At the time that Abel and Cain offered their sacrifices, Abel’s offering was better because sacrifice involving the shedding of blood was part of God’s redemptive plan for humanity. Abel’s offering of an animal from his flock was consistent with that plan. But Abel would not have known that at the time. It seems reasonable to conclude that he just offered what he had as a shepherd, and trusted God that it would be acceptable. Genesis 4:4 states that the Lord had regard for Abel’s offering, which may have included some kind feedback from God that served as evidence that convinced him it was the right thing to do. Then, by becoming a martyr at the

hands of his brother Cain, Abel literally obtained the testimony that he was righteous. So you can see how the elements of faith fit together in the brief story of Abel.

Personal application – This story teaches us that people of faith practice sacrificial giving.

### **Enoch** (v. 5; Gen 5:24)

The Bible does not give much information about Enoch, but in Genesis 5:24 we are told he “walked with God” and then God simply “took him.” Here in Hebrews, we have the further revelation that “he obtained the witness that before his being taken up, he was pleasing to God.” It is also revealed in Jude 1:14-15 –

“It was also about these men that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.’”

It seems that as one who was taken up, Enoch became a symbol of those who will be taken directly into the Lord’s presence when Yeshua returns. And that blessed hope, as we have seen, is an element of faith.

Personal application – People of faith experience transformed lives that are pleasing to the Lord.

### **Noah** (v. 7; Gen 6:13-9:29)

He was given evidence directly from God in the form of a warning that also provided hope for his family, described here as “salvation.” At the time that Noah exercised faith in building the ark, the flood was unseen by his own eyes, but he was convinced that God’s testimony was true. And in the end, Noah was given a testimony of righteousness to the new humanity.

Personal application – People of faith practice obedience without questioning or doubting God.

### **Abraham** (vv. 8-19; Gen 11:31-25:8)

vv. 8-10 – Abraham’s journey from Ur of the Chadees to Canaan was an act of faith because the land was unseen, but he had evidence in the form of God’s direct command to go.

vv. 11-12 – The next act of faith was coupled with his wife Sarah. The Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 required faith for both Abraham and Sarah because the promise of a nation was impossible at that time because of her inability to conceive a child. And without a nation, it would be impossible to gain control of the land of Canaan that was promised in the covenant.

v 13 – Abraham and his family died without ever receiving the promises of a nation, possession of the land of Canaan, and the great blessing to the world, which we know to be Messiah Yeshua. But the text makes it clear in various places that Abraham had an awareness that these things would eventually come about. Here, we are told that he saw them and welcomed them from a distance. In John 8:56, Yeshua declared that Abraham rejoiced to see Yeshua’s day. So we have a sense that Abraham was given a vision or some other way of visualizing what was to come.

vv. 17-19 – It was also an act of faith when Abraham was called to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. He was convinced that even if he slaughtered Isaac, he would still live somehow, perhaps in a resurrection. We see that manifested in his words to his servants in Genesis 22:5 that

both he and Isaac would return to them, knowing full well that God had called Him to sacrifice Isaac. But it was not just wishful thinking. He had evidence that supported the notion because God had declared in 21:12 that the blessing of a nation would come from Isaac. And Abraham could be confident that God's words were true. So he knew that God would have to intervene somehow. Those are all elements of faith in the biblical definition—being convinced that the testimony of a witness is true, thus providing hope for a blessed outcome.

Personal application – People of faith live totally dependent on God.

They will follow God wherever He leads.

They will wait upon Him as long as it takes.

They will trust in Him in whatever difficulty that arises and in times when they don't fully understand what God is doing.

They will maintain an eternal perspective.

And people of faith will pass the tests that come.

### **Isaac and Jacob** (v.20-21; Gen 27:22-29, 39-40; 48:13-20)

The episodes cited regarding the next two persons are similar in nature. Faith was a factor in the way that Isaac gave blessings to Jacob and Esau because Isaac was convinced that God would bless Jacob, regardless of his worthiness of receiving the blessing, because it was based on God's established way.

Likewise, faith was a factor in Jacob's blessing of Ephraim over Manasseh. Jacob gave the blessing of the firstborn to Ephraim, even though it belonged to Manasseh, because it was according to God's stated plan.

Personal application – People of faith stand on God's sovereignty.

### **Joseph** (v.22; Gen 50:24-25)

The text in Genesis 50 records that Joseph showed no disappointment or despair as he realized that his life was coming to an end. And he could do that because he knew he was in the Lord's hands, which is an act of faith. He was also well-aware of God's repeated promises to his family beginning with Abraham. And that convinced him that they would be carried out exactly as proclaimed. So he reminded his brothers about that certainty and wanted his bones returned to the promised land, which would serve as a symbol of the surety of the covenant.

Personal application – People of faith remember God's covenants, and they approach death with confidence.

### **Moses and the Israelites during the Exodus** (vv. 23-30; Ex 1:22-2:3; 2:10-4:20; 12:21-28; 14:14-22; Josh 6)

v. 23 – The parents of Moses exercised faith by trusting that by sending him away in a basket on the Nile River, he would be spared death according to Pharaoh's orders.

v. 24-27 – After being raised in the luxury of the palace of Pharaoh, the decision of Moses to align

with the Hebrew slaves was an act of faith. It took courage to stand up against the oppression of the Jewish people. And it took courage to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. But especially in the latter incident, he was convinced that this was the right thing to do because God had spoken to him at the burning bush.

Personal application – People of faith live courageously and confidently that God is with them.

v. 28 – Placing blood on the doors of the Israelite homes was an act of faith because, humanly speaking, there was no assurance that a simple ritual like that would spare them from some kind of plague that causes death. But they were convinced it was right to do because they had seen how the previous nine plagues had come about exactly as Adonai declared.

v. 29 – Passing through the Red Sea was a similar act of faith that overcame a natural phenomenon.

Personal application – People of faith trust in God to do the impossible.

v. 30 – Notice that the scene shifts to the conquest of Jericho at the end of the exodus. During the wilderness wanderings, aside from Joshua and Caleb, the Israelites stopped being people of faith. The story of the bringing down of the walls of Jericho, however demonstrates that faith was a characteristic of the new generation that grew up during the exodus.

Personal application – People of faith are not intimidated by obstacles.

### **Rahab (v. 31; Josh 2)**

She believed in Adonai, the God of Israel. And she protected the Israelite spies who had entered Jericho before its destruction, even though that could bring harm to her at the hands of her own people who did not believe in Adonai.

Personal application – People of faith are willing to take risks by standing with the plan of God and His people instead of going along with forces that oppose them.

### **The results of faith (11:32-40)**

#### **Victories**

vv. 32-35a – Lists some of the heroes of Israel by name, plus some of the great past accomplishments:

- Conquered kingdoms – Joshua (defeated the Canaanites) and David (Philistines).
- Performed acts of righteousness – Kings like David and Solomon who governed righteously
- Obtained promises – Abraham and David, who received covenants from God
- Shut the mouths of lions – Daniel
- Quenched the power of fire – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego
- Escaped the edge of the sword – Elijah (1 Ki 19), Elisha (2 Ki 6), and Jeremiah (Jer 36)
- Made strong from weakness – Samson
- Became mighty in war and put foreign armies to flight – David and Gideon
- Women received back their dead by resurrection – The widow of Zeraphath (1 Ki 17) and the Shunammite woman (2 Ki 4).

vv. 35b-38 – Other people of faith, however faced great. . .

### **Suffering**

- Tortured – James was pushed off the pinnacle of the temple, then stoned and beaten to death with a club (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.197-201; Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.23.4, 10-18), Eleazar was flogged to death for refusing to eat pork (2 Macc 6) and Hannah and her seven sons were tortured to death for the same reason (2 Macc 7).
- Mocked, scourged, put in chains and imprisoned – Jeremiah (Jer 20; 37; 38).
- Stoned – Zechariah (2 Chr 24) and Stephen (Acts 7).
- Sawed in two – Isaiah (*Bab. Talmud, Yebamoth 49b; Sanhedrin 103b*).
- Tempted – it was common for people being tortured to be offered relief if they recanted their faith (cf. 2 Macc 6:21-22; 7:17,24).
- Put to death with the sword – The prophet Uriah (Jer 26:20-23).
- Were poor, afflicted, wandering in deserts, mountains and caves – the Maccabees.

Verse 39 tells us that they never received everything promised to them. That means they died before receiving the blessing of the Messiah and the realization of the Messianic kingdom. But they never lost faith. And verse 40 affirms that God has provided something better for us.

Personal application – People of faith may get to experience great victories in their lives, but suffering is not an indication of defeat because all people of faith share in the ultimate victories over sin and death.