

A NECESSARY FAITH

Devotional Reading: [Hebrews 11:32-40](#)

Background Scripture: [Hebrews 11](#); [13:1-19](#)

[HEBREWS 11:1-8, 13-16](#)

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

¹⁴ For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

¹⁵ And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

¹⁶ But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

KEY VERSE

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.—[Hebrews 11:1](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the definition of *faith*.
2. Explain the meaning and significance of the key verse.
3. List one change each in the categories of thought, behavior, and speech by which he or she will become more of a stranger to the world.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Power of Examples
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Meaning of Faith ([Hebrews 11:1-3](#))

- A. Things Hoped For, Not Seen ([vv. 1-2](#))
- B. Things Created ([v. 3](#))

II. Examples of Faith ([Hebrews 11:4-8](#))

- A. Abel ([v. 4](#))
- B. Enoch ([vv. 5-6](#))
- C. Noah ([v. 7](#))

Hellfire and Brimstone

- D. Abraham ([v. 8](#))

III. The Goal of Faith ([Hebrews 11:13-16](#))

- A. Promises Far Off ([v. 13](#))
- B. A Country Not Visible ([vv. 14-15](#))
- C. A City God Prepares ([v. 16](#))

Looking for the City

Conclusion

- A. Imitators of the Faithful
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Power of Examples

We live in an age that puts little stock in heroes. This might seem to be a strange assertion on the surface. After all, superhero movies have dominated at the box office for several years now. Consider, though, that the characters at the center of these movies are in categories all their own—amazing to watch but impossible to imitate.

It is much more common in our storytelling to play up the flaws and the personal weaknesses of those heroes who might be realistically presented as worthy of imitation. It is also common to highlight the antihero. This is a central figure who lacks traditional heroic qualities.

This tendency carries over into the world outside of the cinema. Longstanding cultural heroes are regularly brought up for reevaluation and found wanting, etc. Today's text presents challenges: In what ways are the historical figures in our lesson worthy of emulating as faith heroes despite their weaknesses? Should the designation *antihero* be applied to any? Or is there even such a thing as an antihero in a biblical sense? So many questions!

B. Lesson Context

Older commentaries on Hebrews focus on a limited set of questions regarding authorship, recipients, and its worthiness to be considered Scripture. For example, a well-known commentary published in 1876 made an extended argument for authorship by the apostle Paul, a position held by almost no one in our own day.

In keeping with scholarship of the day, the author went on to assert with confidence that the letter was addressed to Jewish converts to Christianity in Palestine. Finally, the writer argued for the book's inclusion in Scripture on four bases: it (1) was written by Paul, (2) was quoted as Scripture, (3) is found in the oldest versions of Scripture, and (4) features internal evidences for such inclusion (namely, its teaching is in harmony with the rest of Scripture).

With the passing of a century and a half since publication of that commentary, we can assert that we know both more and less about the background of Hebrews than we did then. Modern commentaries reflect the wealth of knowledge that we now have about the Jewish and Greek cultural, philosophical, and religious environment in which the letter was written. All of this enriches our understanding of the letter, but gets us no closer to an answer to some of the most basic questions that we still have. Chief among those is the question of who wrote it.

Even though no author is specified, a better understanding of the contexts mentioned above and of the rhetorical skill that lies behind the composition of the letter tells us a lot about the author. The person was educated, based on the quality of the Greek writing. The author also knew Greek culture and philosophy, interacting with both in argument and examples.

Although [Hebrews 11](#) is often treated as a standalone unit of Scripture, it is important to note that the writer of the letter has been building toward it by the time it is reached. Although we do not cover them in today's lesson, the themes of faith and patient endurance, touched on in [Hebrews 10:35-39](#), provide the launching point for the discussion of faith in [chapter 11](#). We can see the author building on the idea of faith as pilgrimage as far back as [chapters 3 and 4](#). With that, we turn to the text.

I. The Meaning of Faith

([Hebrews 11:1-3](#))

A. Things Hoped For, Not Seen ([vv. 1-2](#))

1. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

The phrase *things hoped for* reminds us of the centrality of hope in the overall argument of this letter (example: [Hebrews 6:16-20](#)). For that matter, it reminds us of the way in which faith and hope are linked throughout the New Testament (examples: [1 Corinthians 13:13](#); [Galatians 5:5](#); [Colossians 1:5, 23](#)). The phrase *things not seen* calls to mind the Platonic philosophical distinction between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual. In this line of thinking, those things that are invisible are more real and are actually perfected, whereas physical objects are only shadows of the real things. Although Platonic philosophy is not Christian thinking, we can affirm that the spiritual realm is real, has consequences in the lives we live now, and offers greater hope than what we experience in our physical lives today.

But what does it mean that faith is *the substance of things hoped for*, or that it is *the evidence of things not seen*? The meanings are much disputed since there are various possibilities for translating the Greek words behind *substance* and *evidence*. It seems best to understand *substance* as something like “basis for trust or conviction.” This can be thought of as a financial metaphor. The substance is like a down payment that serves to give confidence that the full amount will be forthcoming.

The word *evidence*, for its part, seems best understood as “proof” or even “demonstration.” We can't go anywhere else in the New Testament to support this conclusion since the Greek word occurs only here. But we can go to the old Greek version of the Old Testament for support. There it occurs several times in contexts of legal argument and proof ([Job 6:26](#); [13:6](#); [16:21](#); [23:4](#), [7](#)).

2. For by it the elders obtained a good report.

The word *for* connects this verse logically with the previous statement. But how does it provide support for the assertion made in [Hebrews 11:1](#), just considered? *Obtained a good report* translates a Greek verb that means “to witness” (translated that way in [John 1:8](#)) or “to testify” to the truth of something (as in [John 5:39](#); [7:7](#); [1 John 4:14](#)). In other words, the faith of *the elders* has been witnessed and attested.

The one who did the attesting was God. That is to say, God is the one who gave a good report as He witnessed the faithfulness of our spiritual ancestors. He is the one who validated their faith in realities that they could not see. We will see shortly why this is important.

What Do You Think?

What's the single most important lifestyle change you will make in order to obtain what is implied in [Hebrews 11:2](#)?

Digging Deeper

What positive impact should this have on unbelievers? on fellow believers?

B. Things Created ([v. 3](#))

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.

Speaking of the “things not seen” ([Hebrews 11:1](#), above), it is *faith* that shows us the reality of divine creation by the spoken *word of God*. The phrase *things which are seen were not made of things which do appear* is, without question, confusing to our ears. A simpler way to say this might be “so that what we see comes from what we do not see.”

What we see is not the sum total of reality! Microscopes and telescopes reveal things not visible to the naked eye. Nevertheless, those realities affect our lives. Even more, there are spiritual realities that are no less important. Even while they remain unseen with physical eyes, by our faith in the evidence recorded in Scripture we know they are there.

Some have suggested that this idea owes its origins to Platonic philosophy (see again commentary on [Hebrews 11:1](#), above). It would be better, though, to acknowledge that this is one place where that ancient line of thought and Christian teaching overlap.

II. Examples of Faith

([Hebrews 11:4-8](#))

A. Abel ([v. 4](#))

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.

The focus now shifts from the creation of the universe to particular individuals who exemplify the truth of [Romans 1:17](#): “The just shall live by faith.” *Abel* is the first of 18 biblical figures cited by name in [Hebrews 11](#).

Abel's *more excellent sacrifice* is offered as a *witness that he was righteous*, but we wonder *why* it was more excellent. The account of the murder of Abel in [Genesis 4](#) gives very little insight. It does not say anything about Abel's sacrifice being *more excellent*. It does, however, seem to imply (based on what we later learn about the sacrificial system of the Law of Moses) that offerings of the firstborn animals were superior to offerings of vegetables and fruit.

Some ancient commentators also noted that [Genesis 4:5](#) seems to make a distinction between the person and the offering in such a way as to suggest Cain's attitude was not what it ought to be. Whatever the case may be, *God testified of his gifts*, validating them and thereby attesting to Abel's righteousness.

But there is more. Intriguingly, mysteriously, by his faith *he being dead yet speaketh*. This calls to mind the chilling statement of [Genesis 4:10](#): "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." There is a sense that the writer of Hebrews understood Abel to still be alive in some sense. Perhaps it is in how Abel's sacrifice demonstrates as a continuing witness that "the just shall live by faith."

What Do You Think?

What habit can you adopt to ensure that your Christian legacy speaks for you after you die?

Digging Deeper

What is your reaction to the desire not to leave a legacy as expressed in the gospel song "Only Jesus"?

B. Enoch ([vv. 5-6](#))

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.

The book of Genesis devotes only a few short sentences to *Enoch*. It was enough, though, for the writer of Hebrews (and countless other ancient Jewish writers) to see great significance in what is said there. The word *translated* is used in an older sense that means something like "taken away." The Genesis account notes only that Enoch "walked with God" and "was not; for God took him" ([Genesis 5:22, 24](#)). But it does not say why. The writer of Hebrews gives us a glimmer of a reason: *he pleased God* (see [Hebrews 11:6](#), next).

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.

The fact that Enoch pleased *God* has brought the writer to this general principle: *without faith it is impossible to please [God]*. Faith involves an approach (*he that cometh to God*). There are two requirements of faith: the one who comes must *believe* (1) that God exists (see [Hebrews 11:3](#), above) and (2) that God rewards those who *seek him*.

Belief in God must go further than merely acknowledging His existence. One is called to believe also that He is ready, willing, and able to reward those who search for Him. That, in turn, implies that one must believe in the power and goodness of God.

C. Noah ([v. 7](#))

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.

The writer has more material to draw from with regard to the next example: *Noah* (see [Genesis 6-9](#)). Of significance here is the phrase *things not seen as yet*, which calls to mind the language of [Hebrews 11:1](#). Noah's trust in *God* regarding things Noah could not yet see is indeed the essence of *faith*. That faith *moved* him to act. *Fear* here should be understood as reverence for God (example: [1 Peter 1:17](#)), not as unqualified terror or the guilt that overtakes a sinner (example: [1 John 4:18](#)).

It's easy to imagine Noah's neighbors laughing in condemnation as he built *an ark*. By in the end, it was Noah's active faith that resulted in *the world* being *condemned*. Peter referred to him as a "preacher of righteousness" ([2 Peter 2:5](#)). But it would be a mistake to envision Noah pounding a pulpit or standing on a street corner yelling at passersby. It is possible that we are to understand from Peter's declaration that Noah's actions in building the ark (a tangible manifestation of his faith) spoke for themselves. Without his necessarily saying a word, those who saw him were exposed to its message.

On the subject of condemning *the world*, the Bible uses this phrase in three senses:

- As planet Earth in its physical sense (examples: [Acts 17:24](#); [Romans 10:18](#))
- As the world's human inhabitants (examples: [Luke 2:1](#); [John 3:16](#))
- As a system of values opposed to God's (examples: [John 14:17](#); [Colossians 2:20](#))

All three could be in play here since the flood of Noah's day was targeted at each (see also the Lesson Context of [lesson 12](#)).

As Noah's decision to act in faith was in and of itself a condemnation of the darkness around him, so it is in our day. The truth of the gospel, faithfully and charitably lived out, is a testimony against sin. It is sufficient on its own to condemn the darkness that is all around us.

What Do You Think?

What step can you take this week to "preach" the positive message of the Gospel that at the same time condemns "the world"?

Digging Deeper

Who are other characters in the Bible that you can look to as examples of condemning the world without speaking hatefully?

HELLFIRE AND BRIMSTONE

“Hellfire and brimstone” was at one time considered by many Christians to be true gospel preaching. One classic example of this emphasis is Jonathan Edwards’s sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards was a New England minister who preached that famous sermon to a church in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741.

Today, this kind of sermon is synonymous with all that critics consider to be wrong with Christianity. Within the lifetime of most of us, a shift has taken place in preaching. Without denying the doctrine of eternal punishment, preachers have found that the Christian message gains a more favorable hearing by presenting a positive message.

But the reality is that just as there is a Heaven to gain, there is a Hell to avoid. These are two sides of the same coin. As we witness to friends and neighbors, how do we communicate both realities effectively? —C. R. B.

D. Abraham ([v. 8](#))

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.

Abraham acted on his faith (see [Hebrews 11:9-12, 17-19](#), not in our printed text), just like the others we have discussed. This critical point is repeated through these examples and those that follow ([11:20-38](#), not in our printed text).

By nature, human beings want certainty and security. Most of the time, however, we are driven by fear, insecurity, and uncertainty. The fears are so common to human experience that no examples are needed. But chief among them, though, is the fear of the unknown. So many people have been held back from achieving great things for God because of this kind of fear.

When God calls us to a task—as when He *called* Abraham to a higher mission—He calls us to trust in Him and to follow His directions. We may never be called to head out to an open desert as Abraham was, but we will be called to many things that we cannot anticipate or imagine. Are you ready to trust God even when you can’t see the finish line or aren’t (yet) equipped with the resources to get there?

III. The Goal of Faith

([Hebrews 11:13-16](#))

A. Promises Far Off ([v. 13](#))

¹³. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

The discussion of Abraham and Sarah encompasses [Hebrews 11:8-12](#), then the inspired writer offered conclusions. *These all died in faith* does not mean that their faith killed them. Rather, it means they remained faithful to the end of their lives. These faithful people died never having seen the fruits of their labor—the verification of their faith, in other words. All this is difficult to imagine in our impatient world that expects instant gratification and quick results.

But these *strangers and pilgrims on the earth* (see [1 Peter 2:11](#)) still speak in this regard even though they are long deceased. This world was not their final home (compare [Genesis 23:4](#)). They did not wander without a goal, though. They were on a pilgrimage to God.

What Do You Think?

Who can you recruit to be an accountability partner to help ensure you both live as “strangers and pilgrims” on earth?

Digging Deeper

How do [John 3:16](#); [1 Peter 2:11-12](#); and [1 John 2:15](#) further challenge you in this regard?

B. A Country Not Visible ([vv. 14-15](#))

¹⁴⁻¹⁵. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

Faith pointed these heroes forward as they sought *a country* not yet visible to them. Homesickness for *that country from whence they came out* would have become an obstacle to their focus on the better land, should they have yearned to go back (compare [Numbers 14:4](#); [Luke 9:62](#)).

It would have been easy for any of the fathers of Israel, given the risks and challenges they faced, to have turned back to the relative comforts of “home.” Perhaps some of them briefly entertained the idea. The writer of Hebrews was mindful of this and saw it as relevant for his audience in a spiritual sense. In the first century AD, Jewish-Christians who were on the edge of abandoning their new faith were very mindful of their “old” country, namely the Judaism in which they grew up. They saw there the promise of earthly relief from the various forms of social and economic pressures that they had faced in their decision to follow Christ.

C. A City God Prepares ([v. 16](#))

¹⁶. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Better is a key word throughout the letter to the Hebrews. Indeed, of the New Testament’s 19 occurrences of the Greek word, 13 appear in this book (the other 12 are in [Hebrews 1:4](#); [6:9](#); [7:7](#), [19](#), [22](#); [8:6](#) [twice]; [9:23](#); [10:34](#); [11:35](#), [40](#); [12:24](#)). Even

though these heroes of the faith could not yet see it, they acknowledged their destination's superiority by their actions.

All this was a model for the writer's original audience. If they oriented their desires toward *an heavenly* country, they would find there the true and living God—the one who *is not ashamed to be called their God*, who has *prepared for them a city*, a permanent place of rest (see [Hebrews 4](#)).

LOOKING FOR THE CITY

After dedicating their lives to the ministry of the gospel, my parents moved to a Christian retirement village. When Mom died a few years later, it took a lot of the “spark” out of Dad. His focus began to turn more and more toward Heaven.

HOW TO SAY IT

AbelAy-buhl.

CainCayn.

EnochE-nock.

PlatonicPluh-ton-ik or Pleh-ton-ik.

One day not long before Dad was called home, my brother Paul was visiting him, as he did regularly. While they were talking, Dad suddenly pointed to the window and said, “Paul, look out there! What do you see?” Paul looked and replied, “Sky and trees.” With a sparkle in his eyes that had long been absent, Dad said, “No, it's the city!”

Paul and I are convinced that Dad was catching a glimpse of the better country—the heavenly city—toward which his life's pilgrimage had long been directed. Is that true of your life? —C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Imitators of the Faithful

The apostle Paul wrote “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). We sometimes undervalue the role of imitation in spiritual maturity. Perhaps you don't feel confident enough to invite others to use your life as a model for their own discipleship. Wouldn't it be arrogant to do so?

Paul didn't see it that way, and neither did the other apostles (compare [1 Peter 5:3](#)). All of us can think of others—ministers, Sunday school teachers, ordinary congregants—who were influential in teaching us and molding us in the life of faith. We too are called to live in such a way that we can add our names to the list of “the just [who] shall live by faith” ([Hebrews 10:38](#)).

What Do You Think?

Which person noted in today's text most inspires you to a lifestyle change? Why?

Digging Deeper

What role will prayer have in this change?

B. Prayer

Lord God, we come to You acknowledging our struggle to trust Your promises as the distractions of life cause us to lose focus. Strengthen our faith so that we may follow You wherever You lead. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The faithful look for God's country.