

## The Meaning of Faith – A commentary

**Hebrews 11** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, by faith<sup>[a]</sup> our ancestors received approval.<sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.<sup>[b]</sup>

### The Examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah

<sup>4</sup> By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable<sup>[c]</sup> sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith<sup>[d]</sup> he still speaks. <sup>5</sup> By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." <sup>6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. <sup>7</sup> By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

### The Faith of Abraham

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."<sup>13</sup> All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were

strangers and foreigners on the earth, <sup>14</sup>for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." <sup>19</sup>He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. <sup>20</sup>By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. <sup>21</sup>By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." <sup>22</sup>By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.<sup>[9]</sup>

## The Faith of Moses

<sup>23</sup>By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict.<sup>[9]</sup> <sup>24</sup>By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, <sup>25</sup>choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. <sup>26</sup>He considered abuse suffered for the Christ<sup>[10]</sup> to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. <sup>27</sup>By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though<sup>[11]</sup> he saw him who is invisible. <sup>28</sup>By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.<sup>[12]</sup>

## The Faith of Other Israelite Heroes

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith

Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,<sup>[k]</sup> because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,<sup>[l]</sup> they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

**12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,<sup>[a]</sup> and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of<sup>[b]</sup> the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Read First:

Matthew 28:16-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## The Commissioning of the Disciples

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but [some] doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

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**Faith and Doubt**

**Hebrews 11, 12:1-2; Matthew 28:16-20**

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Given the choice between faith and doubt – I probably have more doubt. I confess that I am a doubter, big time. I know that one cannot empirically prove the existence of God, and I don't think humankind ever will. That's OK with me. I don't even try. You can't exactly disprove God's existence yet either, so I'm fine living within that ambiguity. Now I did just about blow out my brain listening to a podcast on philosophy and theology that was covering how such arguments for religion get made. If you want a mental workout, let me know and I'll send you that link! (The Liturgists Podcast, Episode 29: Philosophy and Radical Theology)

However, faith is an important concept in scripture. Some may even say that it's the very thing that holds our religion together. There's a leap involved, a fairly subjective leap. I can tell you that I know God and feel a warm and loving relationship toward God, especially as I have come to know God through Jesus – and yet, when push comes to shove – that's my belief, my understanding, my trust, my faith, and that may or may not mean a thing to somebody else. And these days, I don't think that threatening people who don't "get it" works. The fear of hell may be a real one, but I don't think that believing in something in order to get the right ticket in the afterlife inspires a particularly vibrant faith. It tends to create the weak bonds of fulfilling obligations rather than the risk-taking, truth-telling, justice-seeking, life-changing faith that the writer of the book of Hebrews really wants us to impress upon us.

The author of Hebrews has some pretty strong opinions about faith in his commentary on the subject in chapter 11. First, he offers a definition: *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* I like that the word “certainty” doesn’t appear in this definition. Assurance, yes. Hope, yes. Conviction, yes. These are strong words that require commitment and a kind of gritty optimism, but the kind of belief that this biblical writer is talking about does not seem to require us to have unflinching dedication or blindness. We still possess the fullness of our humanity, which means that trusting in what cannot be seen is a risk, a risk that this author believes promises a reward.

Verse 6 of this chapter is the scary one for me. *And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* As I said in the beginning, I’m a doubter. My faith is tiny, mustard-seed like really. I’m quite happy that Jesus has affirmed elsewhere in scripture that a little faith goes a long way. I was also happy to hear Frances Taylor Gench, a brilliant New Testament professor from Union Presbyterian Seminary, propose that the disciples, having SEEN the resurrected Jesus in Matthew both worshiped and doubted. Whereas I do think that my faith pleases God, and may even occasionally be rewarded by God, I dare to hope that my doubt is not something for which I will be punished. In fact, in this chapter, we also find that the lives of those who live “by faith” aren’t exactly the cushy, always pleasant ones.

That little phrase the author of Hebrews uses to describe his examples of living “by faith” is an interesting one, and seems to be taking the literary viewpoint of the writer into account even more so than the individuals he wants to claim are living, as he says, *by faith.* Does the author see them as making decisions – by faith? Or did Abel, and Noah, and Abraham and Sarah, and Moses, and the prophets and the martyrs live such remarkable lives with that very human

mixture of faith and doubt both in mind? Some difficult things happen to them all. Broken relationships. Catastrophic natural events. Political uprisings. State inflicted imprisonments and punishments. If that's how God rewards the faithful, perhaps this argument for persuading people to live "by faith" is not a convincing one. We might prefer to turn on an episode of Joel Osteen and hear more about how God rewards the faithful with book deals, attractive spouses, perfect children, and beautiful mansions. The faithful of the book of Hebrews "all died without having received the promises," that is they were looking ahead to what Christ had to offer, but had not yet experienced it. They died, commended for their faith, but not yet having their faith made "perfect" as chapter 12 says, in Christ. Again, a little translation help might be needed here. Perfect in scripture is not the perfection that we know. It's more like wholeness, or completeness, again founded in human weakness, not in an idealistic world that cannot be attained.

Now we who know about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, who have heard all the stories and know the history, who have believed that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith STILL are confronted by our own doubts. Indeed the face-to-face disciples who saw him – with their own eyeballs - AFTER he died – still weren't quite sure what exactly had happened. That helps me out so much to know that - to have that story on record, in scripture, in the very book that too many lay their hands on and claim certainty, unshakability, and absolute truth. It's a book full of disciples of "little faith" or in Mark of "no faith." It's full of ruffians and scoundrels who happened to please God with just a little trust and courage. The Old Testament heroes are far, far, far from perfect examples, far from the pharisaical purists who superstitiously and sanctimoniously believed that they held the "only" truth.

And it is with these imperfect saints in mind, that the author of Hebrews continues in Chapter 12, saying, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” This author reminds us that faithful living can be difficult, demanding and painful, but that’s life. That’s what we face as human beings, but with God’s help, we not only can survive it, we can find joy in it. Maybe it’s even our doubts that make us more inclined to lean into our faith, and learn to depend on our little mustard seed quantities of it.

Let me close with a prayer by spiritual giant Thomas Merton, a man who also knew how faith and doubt could be interwoven, *"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."* Amen.