

Hebrews 11 – Ray Stedman

Faith Made Visible (11:1-40)

Who are the heroes and heroines of the twentieth century? Human nature continually seeks a model to follow. Remember Elvis Presley in the pop musical world, followed by the Beatles and so many others? In the realm of science, there was Albert Einstein; in statesmanship, Winston Churchill; in social work, Mother Teresa. One thoughtful contemporary, George F. Will, has chosen five men who were models for the last millennium (since 1000 A.D.): Machiavelli, Luther, Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. In the religious honor roll of this century, surely the name of Billy Graham would appear, along with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Martin Luther King, Jr., and of course, Mother Teresa. None of these names was known to the first-century world, yet the names of heroes and heroines of that time, recorded in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews are still known around the world as models of faith and courage. We are invited now to consider the contribution each has made to our lives today. [\(37\)](#)

The Nature of Faith (11:1-3)

Hebrews 11 has been called the great faith chapter. What, exactly, is faith? If it is so important to the redemptive process, we must have a clear understanding of its nature. That need is supplied in verses 1-2. Faith, according to the NIV text, is always two things: (1) a sense of assurance within us (*being sure of what we hope for*) and (2) a certainty that there are realities which we cannot see with our physical eyes (*certain of what we do not see*). A slightly different sense is conveyed by the KJV text, which I prefer at this point. Paul, in Colossians 1:5, sees faith and love as flowing out of the hope awakened by the gospel. Hope, which "springs eternal in the human breast," comes first. Then, faith sees freedom from sin on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, a consequent loving relationship to God, peace with one's neighbors and joy in the midst of life (all *what we hope for*). These realities, though invisible, are personally appropriated; as a result, love for both God and others flows from the sense of gratitude which faith has awakened. Thus, the famous triumvirate of "faith, hope, and love" are central to all Christian living. This quality of faith is *what the ancients were commended for*. This is the theme of the rest of the chapter, consisting of a list of those who triumphed in God's eyes because of their faith. Verse 3 provides an example of faith's ability to see invisible realities. No one can see the words by which God brought the universe into being, but since that is the statement of Scripture (Genesis 1 records 9 times "God said"), faith understands that behind everything visible is the invisible command of God. The statement *what is seen was not made out of what was visible* constitutes a scientific truth which modern physicists recognize: behind everything visible is invisible energy. Faith in God's revelation is a way of grasping reality, without necessarily comprehending all the steps that may be involved. Verses 4-38 list examples of this kind of faith in men and women of the biblical past. The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau is famous for the remark "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer." That is a good description of the men and women listed here. They hear another drumbeat which others do not, and this accounts for the way they often act contrary to normal expectations. The first three examples, Abel, Enoch and Noah, show us the nature of faith. The rest show how faith behaves in real life.

The Qualities of Faith (11:47)

Though the writer has, throughout the epistle, held up Abraham as our model of faith and perseverance, verses 4-7 indicate that true faith was practiced from the very beginning, even before the Flood. As in a modern docudrama, Abel appears first to testify to the value of faith. He and his older brother Cain lived when the world was young. They enjoyed what we would call today "the simple life," which clearly included a recognition of God and a need for a personal relationship. Each brought an offering which reflected his occupation: Cain, the farmer, brought fruits and grains; Abel, the shepherd, brought fat from the firstborn of his flock. It is a mistake to read into this Genesis account any hidden reasons for God's acceptance of Abel's offering and rejection of Cain's. [\(38\)](#) Various explanations have been offered, but the

writer is silent about everything except that God "spoke well" of Abel's offering because it was "better" than Cain's. The word "better" is *pleiona*, which means "greater" or "more important" as suggested by its use in Luke 12:23: "Life is *more than* food, and the body *more than* clothes." If Abel's sacrifice was more important than Cain's, what made it so? The reason suggested is that it came from a heart made righteous by faith! If Abraham's faith was "credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:9), so also was Abel's. Bruce comments on this, "Sacrifice is acceptable to God not for its material content, but in so far as it is the outward expression of a devoted and obedient heart" (1964:283). We are not told just how God made known to the two brothers his acceptance of one and rejection of the other. Genesis 4:7 indicates that when Cain learned that his offering was unacceptable, he grew angry and rebellious. This revealed the attitude of his heart toward the sovereign choices of God. Cain's subsequent murder of his brother showed his stubborn rejection of the opportunity God gave him to repent and to offer again, presumably with a contrite spirit. Cain's offering was rejected because a heart of pride and self-sufficiency lay behind it. This explanation fits well with the context of Hebrews where the writer repeatedly warns against possessing "an evil heart of unbelief." The focus in 11:4, however, is not on Cain but on Abel. *By faith he still speaks*, says the author, even though he is dead. This is a direct allusion to Genesis 4:10, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." It must be linked also with Hebrews 12:24, where our author states that the blood of Jesus "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." It is often suggested that the blood of Abel cries out for the final vindication promised to all the saints (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7), but the blood of Jesus speaks of proffered forgiveness. This seems a likely explanation of the continuing testimony of Abel. His faith in God was one of trust and loving acceptance of whatever God sent. He was willing to wait for ultimate vindication of injustice and mistreatment. His faith teaches us that we must often wait for God's redress of justice. We do so because we know God cannot ultimately fail to act. Enoch, the seventh from Adam, appears next on the stage of testimony in verses 5-6. Two important things mark the character of Enoch's faith: (1) he pleased God by turning away from the godlessness of the world in which he lived and (2) he maintained a daily walk with God which grew so intimate that he was taken to heaven without experiencing death. The Genesis account (5:21-24) indicates that for the first 65 years of his life, Enoch did not walk with God. Presumably he went along with the deteriorating morality of his times, which Genesis 6:5 describes as, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." As Genesis 5:25 suggests, the event which changed Enoch's outlook was the birth of a son, whom he named Methuselah. Some scholars derive the meaning of Methuselah from the Hebrew root *muth*, which means "death," and translate the name "His death shall bring (it)." This would imply a revelation to Enoch of the coming judgment of the world by means of the Flood. The chronology of Genesis 5 places the Flood as occurring the year Methuselah died. In the New Testament, Jude 14-15 mentions such a prophecy given to Enoch, and much of the Wisdom literature of the intertestamental period views Enoch as a farsighted prophet. At any rate, the Genesis account states that from the birth of Methuselah throughout the following 300 years, Enoch "walked with God." This turn in his life was a result of faith, and since faith always requires a word from God to rest upon, it confirms the idea that Enoch was given a revelation of a coming judgment which changed his life. (39) The walk with God which Enoch experienced was one of deepening intimacy. A walk implies a journey in a certain direction and at a measured and regular pace. Enoch's faith flourished as he walked and God bore witness to him that his daily life was pleasing in his eyes. Enoch is an example to the readers of Hebrews of what the writer longed to see happen to them: a steady, daily growth in grace achieved by the inner resources which God supplies to those who take him at his word and act in faith on what he has said. Enoch enjoyed the continuous presence of an unseen Person, and related his life daily to that Person. The result was a fellowship which death could not interrupt. He was translated to glory and was "not found," implying that someone searched for him for some time, but in vain. He and, later, Elijah are the only two individuals in the Scriptures who never died a physical death. They serve as precursors for a whole generation of Christians who will be so translated at the *parousia* of Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:17). We learn from Enoch that faith can draw inner strength from God to such a degree that it triumphs over the ravages of death. Our author views Enoch's faith as so outstanding that it constitutes a general example for all time of how to come to God and to live pleasing to him. *Without faith it is impossible to please God*, he proclaims in verse 6. This brings to mind Paul's similar assertion, "the world through its wisdom did not know him" (1 Corinthians 1:21). It is impossible through human reasoning or scientific searching to find God: faith in God's self-revelation is essential! But that revelation is not confined to Scripture; it begins with nature as Paul forcefully states in Romans 1:19-20 and the psalmist declares in Psalms 8 and 19. Hebrews 11:6 is a helpful answer to the persistent question: "What about the primitive peoples of the

world who never hear the gospel?" This verse says: *anyone who comes to him God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him*. Nature presents overwhelming evidence of the existence of God. Elizabeth Barrett Browning has put its witness well:

Earth's crammed with heaven,And every common bush aflame with God.But only
those who see take off their shoes,The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries!

Only a deliberately resistant mind can set aside nature's testimony to the wisdom and power of an Intelligent Being beyond us. If the witness of nature leads an individual to an honest search for the Creator, God promises to help and *reward those who earnestly seek him*. More and more knowledge will be granted which, if followed, will lead to Jesus. As Peter declared in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." what the writer is implying, by linking verse 6 with the life of Enoch, is that Enoch, seeking God and believing the word he was given, found Christ by faith! So we learn from him that faith means turning from human wisdom to God's revelation and walking in daily obedience to it until it leads to a fellowship which death cannot interrupt!The spotlight of witness then shifts to Noah, who illustrates for us a still different quality of true faith. His faith, too, saw what was invisible, namely the coming of the Flood! (vs. 7). He "saw" it because he believed the warning he received from God 120 years before the Flood came (Genesis 6:3, 7). Moved by fear of that catastrophe, Noah obeyed God and built an ark of wood, by means of which his whole family was saved. Such obedient faith, the writer states, *condemned the world*, by showing how wrong it was. This made Noah *an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith*. In the phrase *condemned the world*, we may rightly visualize the mockery and jeering which Noah must have daily faced as he built a huge ship. He was a hundred miles from the nearest ocean, with a ship many times too big for his own needs, and when had had finished, he filled it with animals! Had he lived in our day he would have been dubbed, "Nutty Noah"! Yet Jesus used "the days of Noah" as representative of the condition of the world before his own return, and indicated that his followers must be prepared to face the same kind of scornful hostility that Noah met day after day.Noah's faith persisted despite massive resistance, and that can only occur when there is an inward change of spirit that is caused by the presence of God. That is what is meant by Noah becoming *heir of the righteousness that comes by faith*. His faith, like Abraham's, was "credited to him for righteousness." He is, in fact, the first individual to be called righteous in the Scriptures (Genesis 6:9). His sturdy, obedient faith stands forever as an example of persistence against hostility that marks those who are born of God and who cannot ever be lost. In these three men, Abel, Enoch and Noah, we are shown that faith waits, faith grows in intimacy, and faith persists. Without these qualities it is impossible to please God.

The Activities of Faith (11:8-38)

"Faith without deeds is useless," says James (2:20). If there is true faith, there will be consequent actions. The writer now launches on a lengthy section in which he shows the variety of actions that can accompany faith, depending on the circumstances which an individual faces. The one mark that is shared by all these activities is that each is unusual---it is not the normal reason ordinarily expressed of those who face such situations. Faith makes some people act differently than others. They will not fit the common mold or drift along with the multitude.

The Faith of Abraham and Sarah (11:8-19)

Already in Hebrews Abraham has shared with Moses a prominent part as an example of faith in the redemptive process. Again, he appears as the pre-eminent role model for all believers in Christ. Verses 8-19 are devoted almost exclusively to Abraham's faith and the author's comments on it. He singles out the highlights of Abraham's life, beginning with his call to leave Mesopotamia and culminating with his willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command. At every point, Abraham responded to a promise of God with unwavering obedience. That is the writer's chief point. God promised Abraham a land, a posterity, a great name and universal influence (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham believed God and left his kinfolk his present comforts and prosperity, and, at the age of seventy-five, set out for Canaan, a land he had never visited and

knew nothing about (v. 8). When he got there he lived as a resident alien, residing in tents and owning nothing except the cave of Machpelah in Hebron, where he buried his wife, Sarah. The motive for this remarkable behavior was his anticipation that God would fulfill his promise and produce on earth, *a city with foundations* whose architect and builder is God (vv. 9-10). It is amazing how far Abraham saw by faith. He lived two thousand years before Christ, and we live two thousand years after him. Yet Abraham, believing that what God had said would take place, looked across forty centuries of time and beyond to the day when God would bring to earth a city with eternal foundations, Abraham saw what John saw in Revelation: a city coming down from heaven onto earth (Revelation 21). (40) That is what Abraham longed for; an earth run after God's order, where people would dwell together in peace, harmony, blessing, beauty and liberty. Because of that hope he was content to dwell his whole life in tents, looking for God's fulfillment. Abraham shows us that faith seizes upon a revealed event and lives in anticipation of it. Faith gives purpose and destination to life. The hope of achieving a utopian city of peace and universal blessing is what we hold out for even today; "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The second highlight of Abraham's faith centered on God's promise of a posterity (vv. 11-12). This involved Sarah as well, for though Abraham was now a hundred years old, and Sarah ninety, God had expressly told Abraham that he would have a son who would produce a long line of descendants. Paul, in Romans 4:19, observes without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead . . . and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. "We must not exclude Sarah from this reckoning of those who triumphed by faith, as the NIV rendering of verse 11 does. For though she laughed incredulously when she overheard God's promise to Abraham that she would bear a son (Genesis 18:11-12), nevertheless, God countered her incredulity with the question, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" Those challenging words would surely have been the source of her meditation in the days that followed. Genesis 21:1 states, "Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised." God's invariable method for fulfilling a promise is to awaken faith first in the recipient. Sarah's growth in grace and spiritual maturity is recognized in 1 Peter 3:6, and all this would powerfully support the design of our author by including Sarah's name deliberately. She shared with Abraham that faith which produced *descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore*. (41) It is highly unlikely, given our author's precise use of language, that these two phrases should both describe the same descendants of Abraham, whether they are physical or spiritual. Abraham was first promised seed "like the dust of the earth" (Genesis 13:16). Then some thirteen years later, when God announced the birth of Isaac within a year, Abraham was shown the stars and the promise was given, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars---if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). This widely separated revelation suggests the phrases should be understood as a reference to two lines of posterity: a heavenly seed (*as numerous as the stars in the sky*) which would embrace all who fit Paul's description: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29); and an earthly line (*as countless as the sand on the seashore*), which includes all the physical descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. This would agree with Paul's statements in Romans 11:11-12 that despite the formation of the church (the heavenly seed), God has not yet finished with his people Israel (the earthly seed). As the writer of Hebrews has intimated, the time will come when God will fulfill the new covenant of grace to "the house of Israel and the house of Jacob." The blending of these two lines will be found in the city for which Abraham looked, on whose gates is written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and on its foundations the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:12-14). The writer comments, in verses 13-16, on these Old Testament names. They all died, he admits, without receiving the things promised, though they still expected God to fulfill his word to them. The fact that *they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance* indicates their understanding that the promises were in the future and would have spiritual as well as physical fulfillment. For this reason, their own imminent deaths did not diminish their confidence that the promises would be fulfilled. This lively faith was shown by their willingness to abide as aliens and strangers in the land they had been promised. Toward the end of his life, Abraham described himself as such in Genesis 23:4. Though he and his son and grandsons could have returned to Mesopotamia had they so chosen, as Jacob did for a while, yet their faith in the promise of their own land not only kept them in Canaan, but also led them to understand that eventually they would live in that city of God which would come down from heaven. Because their faith grew to encompass eternal realities as well as earthly prospects, the writer declares that *God is not ashamed to be called their God*. Once again we see the deliberate link between the visible and the invisible. The land of Canaan was a picture of the heavenly country which would be theirs by faith, as 4:89 asserts. Since, as we have seen, "faith is being sure of what

we hope for," this meant that they were already enjoying, in their inner lives, the intimate blessings that the resurrected body promised when the city of God came down from heaven (Revelation 21:10). Such inner fulfillment is the gift of faith to those who today are willing to look beyond death to God's day of perfect fulfillment. We cannot demand instant answers from God for all our earthly problems, but we can *welcome them from a distance*. We must not lose faith that God will satisfy every promise. Having expanded our understanding of the faith of the patriarchs, our author returns to the severest test of Abraham's faith, and its most glorious triumph, the sacrifice of Isaac (vv. 17-19). Emphasis is laid on the fact that Abraham was asked to slay his son Isaac, even though he had received promises that Isaac would establish the guaranteed posterity. Ishmael was also a son of Abraham, but only Isaac was the son of promise. That is the meaning of *one and only son*. Some have criticized God for subjecting Abraham to such unbearable anguish, but it must be remembered that Abraham's faith in the loving character of God enabled him to solve this crisis. He reasoned that God was in full control of both death and life; he could restore as well as take. On that basis Abraham was able to carry through what was seen as a grisly task. Little of this is seen in the Genesis account (22:1-10), though Abraham did assure his servants that both he and the lad would return from the mountain. The substitution of a ram for the son was intended to portray that later scene at Golgotha when the Son of God would willingly lay down his life. It is, perhaps, this very scene that Paul has in mind when he writes, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all---how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" The restoration of Isaac to his father's arms is called a parable (Gk: *parabole*) of resurrection by the writer. So Abraham's faith reached the highest pinnacle of faith: belief in a resurrection that would fulfill all the promises of God.

The Faith of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (11:20-22)

The thought of a faith still trusting in the very face of death leads the writer to focus on Abraham's descendants---Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. They see their own deaths and yet look beyond in unwavering faith (vv. 20-22). The point about all three is that they clearly saw aspects of the future because they exercised faith in what was invisible at the present. Isaac, though not given to dramatic demonstrations of faith, could still foretell the subsequent character of his twin sons' lives, Jacob and Esau, because he understood, by faith, how each would relate to the program of God (Genesis 27:27-29, 30-40). Jacob, in his earlier years, often found it difficult to trust God explicitly. But with Joseph in Egypt, he too saw the true relationship of Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim in God's purposes. He dared, by faith, to transfer the birthright from Manasseh, the firstborn, to Ephraim, the younger (Genesis 48). He did this, worshipping all the while the God who had foreordained this in wisdom. And Joseph, whose life was filled with dramatic examples of the power of faith, did not let his impending death alter his certainty that God would fulfill his promises concerning Israel. He gave instructions that when Israel would leave Egypt (over two centuries later), they should carry his bones with them and bury them in the land of promise. This Moses did (Ex 13:19), and Joseph's tomb is still visible at Shechem, as Joshua 24:32 records. These men were not dreamers or merely wishful thinkers; they "saw" invisible realities, and adapted their own lives and that of their descendants accordingly.

The Faith of Moses and the Israelites (11:23-29)

The spotlight of witness shifts again, this time to the towering figure of Moses, who stands next only to Abraham as the quintessential believer in the Old Testament. Verses 23-29 touch on five highlights from his life, beginning with the faith of his parents and ending with the Israelites' passage over the Red Sea. Two reasons are given for the faith of Moses' parents, shown in the hiding of their infant son among the reeds of the Nile. They saw he was *no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict*. The adjective *asteion* translated here as "no ordinary" child, is defined by Thayer as the opposite of *agroikos* which means "rustic" (Kistemaker 1984:344). It implies not merely a handsome or beautiful child, but a gifted and unusually promising one. Josephus, in his Antiquities, suggests that Moses' parents received a revelation from God concerning their son's destiny. This would explain why their action was by faith and strong enough that they were unafraid of the king's cruel command to kill all male Israelite babies. Since Jochebed, Moses' mother, was employed by Pharaoh's daughter to become Moses' nurse and help raise him to adulthood, the writer includes Moses' parents (Amram and Jochebed) as the molders of the faith of

Moses himself. So powerful was their influence on Moses that when he was forty years of age (Acts 7:23), having been trained in the culture of Egypt and even regarded as an heir to the throne itself, he renounced his earthly privileges. He went on to identify himself with the people of Israel and resolutely refused the royal title *son of Pharaoh's daughter* (vv. 24-25). Stephen, in Acts 7:20-38, tells us that Moses "thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not." This suggests that Moses had a clear understanding of his calling from God, and his faith motivated his renunciation of Egypt. It was costly because *he gave up the treasures of Egypt to suffer disgrace for the sake of Christ*. Such disgrace (or "reproach") carried with it the promise of infinite reward (eternal life) which made the things he renounced appear paltry indeed. Such a renunciation is like the choices many Christians make today who choose to be faithful to moral principles, rather than to abandon them for the prospect of advancement or wealth. The third mark of Moses' faith was that *he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger and he persevered because he saw him who is invisible* (v. 27). Admittedly, he fled to save his life, but as the writer of Hebrews points out, it was not because he feared the anger of the king. Rather, since he fled *by faith*, it was because he knew God would fulfill his promise to deliver Israel. Moses would await God's timing for that deliverance. So he *persevered* in Midian for forty years, with his faith continually being renewed because *he saw him who is invisible*. That long, discouraging wait was possible only because Moses saw the unseen; he reckoned upon invisible realities, and God surprised him one day with a remarkable experience with a bush that burned but was not consumed! (42) Another biblical example of this kind of patient faith is David, who, knowing he had been anointed as king of Israel, nevertheless patiently waited for God to remove Saul from the throne. Such patience, for those who wait for recognition today, is rewarded by *him who is invisible*. God times such events, lifting up one and putting down another, according to his sovereign purposes. Peter exhorts us, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). Our author leaps over the story of Moses' return to Egypt, his confrontations with the new Pharaoh and the shattering series of plagues which Pharaoh's intransigence brought upon Egypt. This brings us to the final, fateful night, when Moses and Israel kept the first Passover (v. 28). It was a crucial experience both for Israel and the church, as both look back to it as the paradigm of redemption. Central was the sprinkling of the blood of a lamb over the doorpost of each Israelite household. The angel of death would not enter where he saw the sprinkled blood. Paul refers to this incident in 1 Corinthians 6:7-8. Moses believed implicitly that this protection would work, and so it proved. Even Pharaoh's firstborn son lay dead the next morning with thousands of others throughout Egypt. In Israel, not one firstborn son perished, exactly as Moses had predicted. This act of faith broke the back of Pharaoh's resistance, and the Egyptians begged the Israelites to leave, even heaping upon them jewels and treasures to speed the process. But in verse 29, the writer recounts the faith Moses and Israel had to exercise when the Egyptians changed their minds and pursued Israel with an army of chariots and soldiers. The waters of the Sea of Reeds (Hebrew text) flowed before Israel, and the army of Egypt was closing in behind. What could Israel do? God said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water." By faith Moses obeyed, and by faith the waters were driven back all night by a powerful east wind (Ex 14). Israel's faith was shown when they passed between the walls of water and arrived safely on the far shore. When the Egyptians tried the same thing, Moses stretched out his staff, the waters returned, and all the Egyptian soldiers were drowned. Faith dares to obey despite apparent obstacles and difficulties. It pays no attention to impossibilities when God has spoken.

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees
And looks to God alone. Laughs at
impossibilities, And cries, "It shall be done."

Many Christians today face similar circumstances where it looks as if there is no way out. But God does not send believers out into a sea of trouble to drown; his promise is to see them through to the other side. As 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises, "He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Faith Exhibited at Jericho (11:30-31)

No further examples of Israel's faith are described until forty years later, when Joshua leads them against the city of Jericho, the first major obstacle to the conquest of the land of promise. This silence is the writer's way of recalling what he has already mentioned in chapters 3 and 4: the unbelief which the Israelites

showed throughout their wilderness journeys. Not one Israelite who was twenty years or older when they left Egypt would enter Canaan, except Joshua and Caleb. But just as the faith of Moses had inspired some degree of faith in Israel while they were in Egypt, the faith of Joshua stirred the Israelites to act in faith before the walls of Jericho. The ancient city was actually a large fortress, 600 meters in circumference (Kistemaker 1984:347). It contained an armed garrison, filled with experienced warriors. These must be defeated before the valleys of Canaan could be occupied. Following the unique orders given him by the angelic Commander of the Army of the Lord, Joshua set the people marching around the fortress, once a day for six days, and seven times the seventh day. When they gave a great shout on the seventh day, the walls "came atumblin' dawn." By an earthquake, you may ask? Yes, perhaps so, but an earthquake that came in God's precise time and at God's precise place. The incident highlights God's ways of deliverance as being varied and often bizarre in the eyes of many. He is infinitely diverse in his solutions, and we make a great mistake in trying to predict his actions. Along with the story of Jericho's overthrow, we read the remarkable account of Rahab the harlot (v. 31). She had heard of Israel's conquests at the Red Sea and in the wilderness and expected them to assault Jericho many years before. She knew that their victories came from their faith in God, and she "received the spies with peace" (literally) when Joshua sent them to spy out the city. Her motive was not merely to save her life and that of her family; she was convinced, as she said, that "the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." That faith was honored when the walls of the city collapsed and all within were killed except Rahab and her family. That her faith was genuine is confirmed by Matthew when he lists her as one of the ancestors of Jesus. She went on to marry Salmon and became the mother of Boaz, and thus the great-grandmother of David. Faith overcame a sinful life, delivered her from a pagan religion. She was granted a place of honor among the heroes and heroines of faith. The incident also illustrates the fact that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." Rahab was a woman in a man's world, but faith accepts no such distinctions.

A Summary of the Faithful (11:32-38)

This survey of the faith of men and women in the past could have gone on to greater lengths, but the author feels that his epistle must not become burdensome to read. He refers to others in more general terms, mentioning only six more names. Their varied actions of faith are successful, whether in triumph or in suffering (vv. 32-38). The six names span the history of Israel from the days of the judges to the early monarchy. Included are Gideon, noted for his victory over Midian with a reduced army of only 300 men; Barak, who was encouraged by the prophetess Deborah and defeated the Canaanite army of Sisera; Samson, famous as the musclem of Israel, fatally susceptible to the charms of young women, but nevertheless the instrument of God to deliver Israel from Philistine oppression; Jephthah, haunted by his rash vow concerning his daughter, but also conqueror of the Ammonites and punisher of the tribe of Ephraim; David, Israel's greatest king and the author of many psalms, "a man after God's own heart"; and, finally, Samuel, first of the prophets and last of the judges, who lived by faith from his boyhood to his final days. Others are simply listed as *the prophets*, which would surely include the great names of Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and others. The faith these men possessed led them to three kinds of action (vv. 33-34). Faith helped some to govern--*conquered kingdoms* (David over the Philistines), *administered justice* (Solomon--1 Kings 21:9) and *gained what was promised* (Josh 21:43). Faith helped others to triumph over fearful odds--*shut the mouths of lions* (Dan 6), *quenched the fury of the flames* (Dan 3:17), and *escaped the edge of the sword* (2 Kings 6:11-18). Still others were enabled by faith to be mighty in battle--*whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies* (1 Sam 14:14). These were all actual historic incidents, familiar to the readers of this letter from the Old Testament accounts. But faith was not confined to men only. Women of faith were also greatly benefited, receiving dead loved ones back to life. Notable in the Old Testament were the widow of Zarephath, whose son Elijah restored, even though she was not of Israel (1 Kings 17:24); and the woman of Shunem who called Elisha to raise her dead son because she knew him to be a man of God (2 Kings 4:8-37). The readers of Hebrews could also think of the widow of Nain, whose son Jesus raised, and of Lazarus whom Jesus restored to his sisters, Mary and Martha, and perhaps also of the widows in Joppa who rejoiced when Dorcas was restored to them by Peter. These resuscitations were not mentioned to establish a norm, but to show what powers faith could release when God chose to act. Nor was faith always a means to triumph and victory. Verses 35-38 record the other side of the picture. The incidents described here seem to be drawn mainly from the days of the Maccabean revolt and the cruelties of the Syrian king Antiochus

Epiphanes in the early second century B.C. The word for *tortured* reveals the type of torment used: a wheel or rack upon which the victim was stretched and then beaten to death. The *better resurrection* they looked for was not a return to this life, but the resurrection to eternal life, which was promised to all who were faithful unto death. The jeers, flogging, chains and prisons of verse 36 were experienced in many places and times, even by some recipients of this letter, as 10:32-34 declares. Jeremiah may have been the reference to some who were stoned, for tradition says he so died at the hands of the Jews in Egypt. Isaiah was thought to be sawed in half during the reign of Manasseh, the wicked son of King Hezekiah. Many were reduced to poverty and had to dress themselves in animal skins (Elijah, Elisha and John the Baptist, for example), and wandered about in deserts and mountains, living in caves because they were unacceptable to society. But the writer notes that the world was not worthy of them. God's heroes and heroines are often unrecognized while they are alive. Like Jesus himself, they are "despised and rejected of men." But what does that matter when the final triumph sees them honored and acclaimed before the whole universe? As another ardent Christian, Jim Elliot, put it: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." One cannot think on these verses today and not notice the contrast with the so-called health-and-wealth gospel. For the person of faith, material comforts mean less and spiritual values mean more. The question of Jesus comes to mind: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" The people of God may often be poor and despised, but their faith opens to them riches of spirit which the world has never known.

Something Better for Us (11:39-40)

The closing verses (39-40) bring us back to the opening statement of the chapter, that faith *is what the ancients were commended for*. Though all those referred to by name or described by action in this chapter received commendation from God even in this life, yet they did not receive the promised city "with foundations" which Abraham sought (vv. 10 and 16). The reference to *foundations* indicates something material and earthly, rather than purely spiritual. They looked for more than their own personal satisfaction, but still longed to see God's purposes fulfilled on earth. The *something better for us* denotes the reality we have found already in Christ, which the men and women of faith in the Old Testament would attain only after their earthly life ended. We are already recipients of the blessings of the new covenant. They would not fully know them till the resurrection. The New Jerusalem, come down from heaven to earth, in which God will dwell among us and by which all the supernal vision of the prophets will be fulfilled, blends the two peoples of God together. The hope of being made perfect includes the hope of physical resurrection, as many Scriptures declare. In that "first resurrection" (Revelation 20:6-7) believers of both old and new covenants will join. This is the way that *together with us would they be made perfect*. This is the mystery of God's will which Paul describes in Ephesians 1:9-10 "to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment---to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." What transcendent glory is described in those words, no one now really knows. John gives us the best description in Revelation 4-5. There the redeemed are gathered from all ages, amid millions of angels, to sing the praises of the One who redeemed them from the miseries and death which sin causes, and gave them an eternal ministry of glory and power beyond human description. The Redeemer will be forever the center of universal worship. It will be as Anne Cousin writes:

The bride eyes not her garment, But her dear bridegroom's face; I will not gaze at
glory, But on my King of grace: Not at the crown He giveth, But on his pierced
hand; The Lamb is all the glory Of Emmanuel's land. ("The Sands of Time Are
Sinking")

Calvin caught the thrust of this chapter and said, "If those on whom the great light of grace had not yet shone showed such surpassing constancy in bearing their ills, what effect ought the full glory of the gospel to have on us? A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?" Our motivation and inspiration is fuller than theirs, for we have Jesus himself to sustain us. It is to that powerful support that the author now turns his reader's attention.