

Heroes of faith Hebrews 11: Sermon 16th Feb 2020

Reading: Hebrews 11

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she^[b] considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸ even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

²² By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

²³ By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Introduction

This morning I want to think about Faith

- What it means to have faith
- And how to live as men and women of faith
- This is what the writer to the Hebrew church is doing here.
- He is writing to the Jewish people
- Telling them how Jesus is their messiah
- That he is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel

The first chapters of Hebrews are all about Jesus

- How he is fully God, above all other spiritual powers
- Yet also fully human
- He is described as greater than the prophets and patriarchs
- As a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek
- How he is the true Passover lamb by whose blood we are saved
- The fulfilment of the new covenant.
- All tying into the history and identity of the Jews as God's chosen people.

Now we come to the next point

- They need to put their faith in Jesus in order to come to God
- Just as they used to come through a priest and sacrifice
- Now they come through Jesus
- And this is done by faith

So, we read in Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

So, he is saying that to follow God requires faith in Jesus

- But following Jesus is hard and we need encouragement
- And we get this encouragement in three ways
 1. From each other “*spurring one another on*”
 2. From the example of other men and women of faith

This is what Hebrews 11 is all about

3. And finally, from the example of Jesus that we will see later from Hebrews 12

So, this morning I want you to be encouraged

- But more than that I want you be encouragers
- To be inciting works of faith, love and service in each other
- To do that I think we need a clear understanding of what faith is
- How to live by faith
- And who to have faith in

What is faith?

As we read earlier in Hebrews 11 (vs.1)

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

- This does not mean faith is blind
- It is confidence about what we cannot know based on the experience and knowledge we have.
- Faith is hope for the future based on our experience of the past
- In other words, faith has to be based on evidence
- That is why the writer to the Hebrews has spent so much time reminding the Jews of their history

This evidence is not just about events and experiences

- It is primarily based on a person
- Namely, God
- Because God has been faithful, we can have confidence or faith in Him
- As we just read in Hebrews 10:23
- *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess”*
- Why?
- *“For he who promised is faithful”*

Then he goes on to say, *“This is what the ancients were commended for.”* (Heb. 11:2)

- And gives lots of examples of their faith
- And this is what we are going to look at this morning

Creation

And we will begin with creation (Heb. 11:3)

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

- This seems a strange place to start
- But it is important to begin here
- If we do not accept God as our creator, then we will struggle to accept Him at all

Creation tells us this is God’s world

- We are all ultimately responsible to Him
- Answerable to Him
- We have an identity, purpose and meaning to our lives
- One we can only find by faith in Jesus
- And this underpins all else

As we have just read in verse 6

“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Abel

The next example of faith is Abel

- But what did he do?
- We know the story
- Abel offers a sacrifice of a lamb and his brother Cain offers fruit.
- God accepts Abel’s offering but not Cain’s.
- Cain is so incensed he lures Abel into the fields and kills him.

Horrible story but how does he show faith?

- Fortunately, the writer gives us a clue - It is in the offering

“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.” (Hebrews 11:4)

He shows faith by offering what God requires.

- The only offering acceptable is the blood of the lamb
- As we now know this is a foretaste of the truth of Jesus
- The precious lamb of God who died for our sins
- because it is only through the blood of Jesus that we can be saved.

It is vitally important it is this we rely on to be made acceptable to God

- We know God loves us unconditionally
- But we can only become acceptable to him through Jesus.
- We must rely on him and not on ourselves
- By the same faith that Abel shows and testifies to
- Even though he is now dead.

Compare this to the parable of the wedding banquet.

- The guests had rejected the king’s invitation
- And the servants had welcomed in anyone who would come
- But Jesus goes on and says

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹² He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless.

¹³ “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matt. 22:11-13)

Abraham

Another example of faith is Abraham

- Here we see some example of faith in action.
- He leaves his home in obedience to God.
- Trusting him to fulfil his promise

He is even willing to offer God his only son

- An action then linked to God offering His son Jesus for us.
- Both examples of great faith
- But not the whole story of Abraham’s life.

He also has moments of great doubt

- Like when he tries to fulfil God’s promise by having a son through Sarah’s maid
- Or when he pretends Sarah is his sister out of fear Pharaoh will kill him
- I find it encouraging that so many of these men of faith are flawed.
- Even the best of them seem to have very human frailties
- Yet still held up as an example of faith

There is David, who we heard of last week

- Faces Goliath in faith
- Yet commits adultery and murder

Moses who also commits murder

- And runs in fear to hide in the wilderness
- When God calls him to go back
- He only agrees if his brother Aaron goes with him.

Gideon

- He bravely fights the Midianite army with only 300 men.
- Yet afterwards makes an idol with the captured gold.
- We are told in Judges 8:27

“Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.”

Even Samuel the greatest priest in Israel’s history

- Yet was let down by his sons

“When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel’s leaders. But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.”
(1 Samuel 8: 1 & 3)

Some of the men on the list have little to recommend them

- Like Samson who was a violent thug and a womaniser
- Jephthah, who was an outlaw gang leader who made an arrogant boast that cost his daughter her life.
- Yet each of them has a part to play in God’s plan
- In God’s purposes for his people.

Each in their own way acknowledge Him as directing their lives

- Calling on Him at time of need
- Risking much on the chance He would act.
- Looking forward to a promise yet unfilled

Like Joseph, who requested his bones be returned to the promised land

- Like Rahab, the only woman mentioned by name in the passage
- An innkeeper of suspect morals
- But she risked her life to hide the Israeli spies from the Jericho soldiers.
- Because she knew God was with The Jews
- And in that act of faith saved herself and her family.

She then went on to become one of the two foreign women in the genealogy of Jesus

- We read in Matthew 1:5-6

“Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse,⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

It is a strange assortment of people

- Some famous and successful
- Winning battles and overcoming great obstacles
- Others unknown yet enduring great hardships
- Some even martyred.

They weren't necessarily exceptionally good

- Yet all had faith that somehow God was in charge
- Despite everything his way was best
- And refused to let go of him, even in the direst of circumstances.
- Holding on to hope in Him

A hope we now see in Jesus

- As we read at the end of the chapter
"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."

Conclusion

What is the point for us?

- What lesson should we take from this
- We are told in Hebrews 12
- 2 things we should do
 1. Look to Jesus
 2. Endure hardship as discipline

Look to Jesus

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This doesn't mean we are surrounded by saints looking down on us

- They are witnessing to us of what faith means
- So, just as these people of faith looked forward to Jesus
- We too should keep focussed on him
- We should not rely on our own efforts or our achievements
- Nor focussing on our failures or shame
- But rely wholly on Him
- Like Abel – trusting in his sacrifice.
- And not losing heart

Endure Hardship as Discipline

The second thing we can do is endure hardship as discipline

- That too is a mark of faith
- Not to think God as failed us when things go wrong
- But to look for him to teach us through it
- To make us stronger through it
- Hebrews 12 goes on

⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

*⁶because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ⁸If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! ¹⁰They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

This does not mean God send hardships to teach us a lesson

- And if we could only learn the lesson then we would not have any problems
- It doesn’t work like that
- What it means is that when we face hardships
- As we all do at times
- Even when it is unfair

God can use it to make us better sons and daughters

- To increase our faith
- If we will let Him
- If we will continue to trust Him
- To believe that, in Him, what is to come far outweighs any loss
- As Pauls says in Philippians 4:13
“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

And again, in Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Amen