

Hebrews 11

(Courtesy Jim Smith)

Background

NT Wright states that “Hebrews has now reached a plateau from which there is an excellent view of those who have gone on before. Looking at them, the readers can discover for themselves what is up ahead, what they will need to cope with it, and the fact that when they get there themselves, there will be a great welcome.

Hebrews 11 and 12 hang together as one story from creation to the new creation; from the first covenant to the second convenient. Hebrews 11 describes what true faith is and gives a brief history of God’s people and how they illustrated true faith. Hebrews 12 continues the story beginning with the stories climax with Jesus before instructing the readers to live within the story, discussing the goal of the journey and what will happen at the end of the journey.

1. What is the relationship between faith and hope in the definition provided in verse 1-3?
2. The IVP New Bible Commentary states, “In a world where people dismiss faith as ‘wishful thinking’ or simply identify it with the beliefs and practices of a particular religion (e.g. the Muslim faith) it is good to have a comprehensive picture of faith that actually pleases God. Hebrews shows the link between faith, *hope obedience and endurance illustrating that it is more than intellectual assent to certain beliefs*. God –honouring faith takes God at his word and lives expectantly and obediently in the present, waiting for him to fulfil his promises. (italics added)

Carson notes in his discussion of Hebrews 11, “Not once does faith take on the modern sense of ‘religious preference’ or ‘belief without grounding in fact or truth.’ So much has scientism brainwashed our world in this respect that we easily think of ‘faith’ in this purely subjective sense. If you tell others what you believe, they do not ask you what your reasons are to determine whether or not your belief is well grounded. It is automatically assumed that such faith *cannot* be more than religious preference, for which there are by definition no useful criteria.”

Whether because “scientism has brainwashed our world” or because it is simply a practical way to reduce religious persecution and discrimination, our Western culture has adopted this “religious preference” or “belief without grounding” approach to dealing with our multi-faith cultures. What impact has this had on our ability to share our faith with others in a meaningful impactful way? How might we effectively present the gospel in a God-honouring way that is more than assenting to certain beliefs? Have you had conversations about the *grounds for your beliefs* with colleagues or friends who practice a different religion? How did it go?

3. In discussing the reference to the Cain and Abel story, Wright writes, “But the point here (this becomes clear as the chapter progresses) is that God accepted Abel, and will reward his faith

through and out the other side of death. Though he is dead, the account of his faith is still a powerful witness to us much later.” Later, when discussing the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, Wright described the intimate covenant bond that they had with their God and he states that they were taking God at his word, living by His promises, and trusting him even through death. He concludes “They too looked beyond their own deaths to a future fulfilment, not just in that their descendants would inherit the land, but in that they too would have a part to play in God’s eventual purposes.” He then asks, “Will we continue to trust God for his promises, even if there is little sign within our own lifetime of their being fulfilled? Have we thought through and firmly grasped the nature of the heavenly city which we are promised, towards which all early cities are at best long-range signposts?” Discuss.

- a. The author of Hebrews points out that Joseph’s faith was such that he was so confident of God’s promises that he gave his children instructions of how to bury his bones in the Promised Land – a prayer that was not answered for centuries. How might this macro view of things effect our view of answered or unanswered prayer?
- b. Barclay states, “There is something of permanent greatness here. The thought in the mind of all these men was the same: ‘God’s promise is true, for he never breaks a promise. I may not live to see it, death may come to me before that promise becomes a fact; but I am a link in its fulfilment. Whether or not that promise comes depends on me; here is the great function of life. Our hopes may never be realized but we must live in such a way that we shall hasten their coming. It may not be given to every man to enter into the fullness of the promises of God, but it is given to him to live with such fidelity as to bring nearer the day when others will enter into it. To us all is given the tremendous task of helping God make his promises come true.”

What promises of God do you claim that may not be fulfilled in your lifetime? Are there things that you have been praying for many years or decades that appear to you to be unanswered? How might this passage address unanswered prayer?

4. Raymond Brown in commenting on verses 8-12 states these verses illustrates 5 aspects of faith. He says that it is **responsive** (Abraham obeyed when he was called), **sacrificial** (Abraham was told to leave his family, his father’s house and his country and the patriarch was prepared to abandon all of this), **courageous** (he wasn’t told where to go) **persistent** (the land that had been promised was possessed by others; Abraham and his decedents exercised persistent and confident faith knowing that God would be true to his word) and **dependent** faith.

In discussing the sacrificial faith, Brown notes that Luther said “In the first place, it was hard for Abraham to leave his native land, which it is natural for us to love...Furthermore; it is hard to leave friends and their companionship, but most of all to leave relatives and one’s father’s house.” He concludes that faith in God sometimes makes this kind of demand. Brown further states “Calvin observed that it is a ‘rare trial of faith to leave what is in one’s hand to go seeking for what is far off and unknown to us’. Abraham recognized that in responding to God’s

demands he must place his entire reliance on the God who not only called him, but would guide his steps, meet his needs, and prepare his future. New Testament writers have a similar conviction about God's call to believers. We do not know every step of the way, but God has promised to equip us with everything good. (13:21) "

We have all seen and admired such sacrificial obedient faith in missionaries. Have you ever felt the Spirit was leading you to leave and make a journey to another place? How hard is it for you to follow the Spirit's leading even on a daily basis without knowing where you are going? How hard is it to live completely in reliance on God?