

"BY FAITH" PART ONE (HEBREWS 11:1-19)

If you made a list of the greatest chapters in the Bible, the chapter we're going to be in this morning would make the list. We are in the 11th chapter of Hebrews looking at the first half. The refrain throughout this chapter is "By faith..." and it goes on to tell you what they did. Corrie Ten Boom, a tremendous woman of faith said, "Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible." As we make our way thru Hebrews Chapter 11 you will see that.

It is not how much faith you have that counts. What matters is the object of your faith. Their faith was in God. The proof that they believed God was not in their theology or morality, but in their willingness to trust and obey God.

READ James 2:18. Of course when James uses the word "works" he is referring to a person's actions.

Why this "roll call of faith"? Why this "hall of heroes"? What's the context of Hebrews Ch 11? For 10 chapters the writer of Hebrews has made his case to a largely Jewish audience – mostly believers, some unbelievers – that the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old covenant of the Law. To prove this he refers his readers to their own Scriptures (O.T.). He shows them that Jesus is better than the angels, better than Moses, a better High priest, a better sacrifice for sin. It's because of Jesus's perfect once for all atoning death on the cross that the old covenant was rendered obsolete. We don't need it any more.

For a devout God-fearing Jew who had spent their whole life keeping the Law, you can understand why it would be difficult for them to let go of it. The writer of Hebrews tells them to "consider Jesus." Having now been presented clear evidence from Scripture that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Savior – don't hesitate. Let go of the old. Embrace Christ. Your own Scriptures say, "The just shall live by faith" (Hab 2:4). So then, put your faith in Jesus and preserve your souls.

Still, it is very difficult to believe God when you are presented with something that is entirely new like the Gospel. When this letter was written the Jewish people had been observing the old Levitical system for well over 1500 years. Their whole culture was built around it. So the writer refers his audience back to many of their O.T. heroes. He says to them, in essence, "Your heroes did exactly what I'm asking you to do – to believe what God is telling you even though it's new; even though it's something you've never seen or experienced before." That's what they did! They believed God. They took Him at His word. They acted in faith. That's the whole context and point of Hebrews Ch 11.

READ Hebrews 11:1-2

Here are the basic features of faith. Faith is trusting in what is not visible or what has not been experienced. Faith stands on that which is hoped for, the promises of God. Our "assurance" is based upon WHO said it. We can believe it for that reason alone. We have a "conviction" of it even though it is not a reality, even though we cannot see it yet. We are confident that God WILL do what He said He would do. He doesn't lie.

READ Hebrews 11:2. NASB says, "For by it [faith] the men of old gained approval." NIV says, "This is what the ancients were commended for." The idea here is divine approval. Faith is what pleases God. The question often gets asked – BY FAITH. Salvation, God's approval, has always been by faith – faith in God and what He said. Quite often that is all we have to go on. This is what we see throughout Hebrews 11. Why are all the people mentioned in this chapter revered as heroes? Because they lived out their lives based on what God had promised them – even in some cases without seeing the promises fully realized in their lifetimes. They believed God and obeyed.

READ Hebrews 11:3

Here we are reminded of the Genesis account of Creation. Do you believe the Genesis account? Do you really believe that God spoke the

entire world into existence? Why? You didn't see Him do it. You weren't there! All you have to go on is what the Bible tells you. We believe it by faith despite the many voices out there who argue otherwise.

Before God created the world, what existed? The triune God – Father, Son and Spirit – in perfect, intimate, holy fellowship. At some point God created something out of nothing. No mass of energy. No big bang. Just God speaking it all into existence. To believe that requires faith. If you can't believe what God says in Genesis 1, how are you going to believe anything else the Bible says? The lesson from Hebrews Ch 11 is that by looking back in faith at what God did in the past, we can look forward by that same faith to what God says He will do in the future.

The first man of faith we see is Abel. The story of Cain and Abel is told in Genesis 4. READ Hebrews 11:4.

Abel was declared as righteous by God. When we read the Genesis account we're never told WHY Abel's sacrifice was better. READ Genesis 4:4-5

I've heard a lot of sermons on Cain and Abel. Almost all of them conjecture the reason why Abel's sacrifice was accepted. They said it was because Abel's was a blood sacrifice whereas Cain's sacrifice was not. Perhaps. Some said Abel's sacrifice was better because Abel brought the best of his flock while Cain did not bring the best of his crops. Perhaps. The truth is that the scripture never tells us why.

The bottom line is that God knew the hearts of both men. God knew that Abel was a righteous man, a man who lived by faith, who loved God and desired to please Him. Cain, on the other hand, had an evil heart. READ 1 John 3:12.

Back to Hebrews 11... the last sentence in v 4 says, "Through his [Abel's] faith, though he died, he still speaks." Even though Abel's life was cut short, centuries later we read about Abel's faith. Abel will always and forever be known for this one act of faith.

Next up is Enoch. READ Hebrews 11:5-6.

The story of Enoch is told in Genesis 5, the "And he died" chapter. Eight times in that chapter the phrase "and he died" is repeated. Every person mentioned died except for one – Enoch. READ Genesis 5:23-24. Hebrews 11 tells us that Enoch pleased God. No specifics are given. Genesis 5 states simply that "Enoch walked with God." Enoch enjoyed close fellowship with God, maybe the kind of fellowship Adam and Eve had enjoyed in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall. Enoch walked so closely with God that God decided to bring Enoch home to be with Him. Enoch never experienced physical death. Genesis 5 says, "and he was not, for God took him." One minute there he is and the next minute he's not. Enoch just disappeared.

READ Hebrews 11:6. This verse tells us why faith is important. If you want to have close fellowship with God like Enoch had; if you want to draw near to God, then you MUST have faith in Him.

V 6 goes on to tell us exactly that we need to have faith IN. What is it that we must believe about God. Two essential things are mentioned here. First, that God IS. This is more than just believing that God exists. You must believe that God IS who He IS and not just an idea about Him that has been conjured up in someone's imagination. How can we really KNOW who God is? By His own revelation of Himself in His word [*hold up Bible*]. This is called "progressive revelation." The inspired word of God passed down to us thru the prophets, apostles and other messengers. But God also reveals Himself in His creation. This is called "general revelation." We see evidence of God and see His character in the beauty and intricacy of nature. Through His creation God shows His loving and intelligent nature. God also revealed Himself in a Person, in Jesus. The writer of Hebrews earlier described Jesus as being "the exact representation of [God's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3). So we must believe that God IS who He really IS.

The second thing v 6 tells us that we need to believe about God is that He rewards those who seek Him. I like the KJV here. It says, "He [God] is a

rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” Deuteronomy 4:29 NLT says, “If you search for [God] with all your heart and soul, you will find Him.” Seek after God and He will save you. He will bless you and give you rest.

The next person of faith is Noah. His story is told in Genesis 6-9. The writer of Hebrews condenses it down to one verse. READ Hebrews 11:7.

Noah was “warned by God concerning events as yet unseen.” What was Noah warned about? READ Genesis 6:11-14, 17, 22. God gives Noah the dimensions, detail, specific instructions; God says He is going to save Noah and his family; God establishes a covenant with Noah.

In April we got to visit the Ark Encounter in Kentucky. What impressed us most is the massive size of the ark. The sheer magnitude of the undertaking to build such a structure is incredible to think about. It was 450 ft long, 75 ft wide, 45 ft high, had 1.4 million cubic ft of space inside and took anywhere from 55-75 years to construct.

What physical evidence did Noah have that any of this was going to happen? He had nothing else to go on but God’s word. He lived in the Middle East, inland, it had never rained before. But Noah did what God told him to do even though it defied all logic and common sense at the time.

Back to Hebrews 11... V 7 says, “In reverent fear [Noah] constructed an ark for the saving of his household.” He believed God really was going to send a flood upon the earth. That’s faith! In the last sentence the writer of Hebrews says, “By this [Noah] condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” Peter refers to Noah as “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). You won’t find any sermons by Noah in Genesis. But think about it. People passing by must have seen what Noah was doing when he was building the ark. Surely they asked him why he was doing it. I’m sure Noah relayed to them what God had told him concerning the watery judgment to come. But nobody believed Noah and that only reinforced their wickedness.

You all know the rest of the story. Noah built the ark and then the rains came! Because of his faith in building the ark, his obedience to God, Noah became "an heir of righteousness."

The last person we're going to consider this morning is Abraham. His story is told in Genesis Chapters 12 to 25. READ Hebrews 11:8-10.

In Genesis 12 God called Abraham. He said, "Go from your country to a land that I will give you." Abraham knew nothing about this new land. He didn't even know where it was. And he had no clue about the inheritance.

Abraham obeyed immediately. Gen 12 says, "So Abraham went as the Lord had told Him." He WENT! He believed God and left the familiar behind. V 9 says, "By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land." He wasn't from there. He was a foreigner in that new place. And he never put down roots. He spent his entire life (as did Isaac and Jacob) living a nomadic lifestyle in tents moving around. They lived there as strangers. V 10 says that Abraham looked forward to inheriting, not the Promised Land that we know today as Israel, but to a heavenly inheritance. In v 16 a little later we'll see that Abraham desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. His sights were set on a heavenly city, "whose designer and builder is God." He had his eyes on God and not on land or possessions, and yet we know that God blessed him materially.

READ Hebrews 11:11

Sarah is Abraham's wife. It's interesting that the writer says that "by faith Sarah...received power to conceive." When you read Genesis it doesn't appear that Sarah had much faith. But the Holy Spirit reveals to us here that she did.

READ Hebrews 11:12

You know the story from Genesis 15. God promised to give 75-year old Abraham an heir, a son, in his old age. The outward circumstances looked fairly hopeless. But God promised that thru this son He would make

Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Abraham's reaction: "And [Abraham] believed the Lord, and [God] counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). God kept His word and 25 years later, when Abraham was 100, the promised heir, Isaac was born.

So while Abraham, Isaac and Jacob enjoyed part of the promise God made them, they did not see all of it fulfilled in their lifetimes. The promises of becoming a great nation and of taking possession of the Promised Land would find their fulfillment centuries later.

READ Hebrews 11:13-16

If Abraham, Isaac or Jacob had been like most people and just focused on this world only they might have become discouraged and headed back to their original homeland (Jacob did for a while but then he came back). The writer of Hebrews says, v 16, that their desire was for a better country, a heavenly one. God says I am not ashamed to be called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am preparing a city for them, a heavenly city. Did you know that as a believer, that God is not ashamed to be called your God? Did you know that He is preparing a place for you?

We all know the next story from Genesis 22. READ Hebrew 11:17-19.

This is indeed a remarkable story of faith. Here the Holy Spirit reveals something new that is not in the Genesis account. He tells us Abraham's thinking at the time. This insight into the mind of Abraham shows us why he is such a great example of faith. God had promised Abraham that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars of the heaven, as many as the number of grains of sand on the seashore. All of those promises would find their fulfillment thru his son Isaac. If something happens to Isaac and he dies, none of those promises can happen. Abraham knows this.

Well, you all know the story. Abraham and Isaac are making their way up the mountain when Isaac asks Abraham, "where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham responds, "God will provide for Himself a lamb

for the offering.” We know how the story ends, but Abraham didn’t. All he knew is that if God’s past promises to Him were going to become a reality, Isaac could not die. Abraham really believed that God was going to provide an animal. But then they reach the top of the mountain. They build an altar and they place the wood on it. No animal. So Abraham binds Isaac and lays him on top of the wood. Still, no animal. Abraham reaches out his hand and takes the knife to slaughter his son...

What is Abraham thinking at this moment? He knows that if he DOES kill Isaac – what an awful thought that is – but if he does, he knows God will have to raise Isaac back to life. All the promises are in Isaac! God Himself said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” With the knife in his hand and ready to plunge it into his son, God intervenes. An angel stops Abraham and instead of a lamb God provides a ram caught in a thicket. That is what Abraham offered to God as a burnt offering in Isaac’s place that day. But in a real sense Abraham offered up Isaac that day. He gave Isaac completely to God. He gave it all to God.

V 18 says, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This is a quote from Gen 21:12. Isaac would go on to have a son named Jacob. Jacob’s name would be changed to Israel and that’s the name, the covenant name that God would give to Abraham’s descendants.

Centuries later on that very same mountain, the same location where Abraham was willing to offer up his son Isaac, God would offer up His only Son, Jesus. There the Lamb of God would be slain in our place. On a Roman cross we call Calvary Jesus died for our sins. And thus Abraham’s words came true: “God will provide for Himself a lamb!” Jesus.

We will pick it up next week in verse 20.