

THE STAND

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE HEBREWS CHAPTER 11



Chapter 11 Commentary

Faith and hope are terms commonly used in the Christian life. One of the most elementary parts of being a Christian is having faith in Jesus Christ. What does it mean to have faith? And, what are we actually hoping for? As the writer of Hebrews begins Chapter 11, he wants to paint a picture of real faith and hope in action.

The basic meaning of faith is trusting in something or someone. We all have faith. If you have driven over a bridge recently, you had faith. While it seems simple, you trusted that the bridge would support your vehicle and that you would arrive safely on the other side. Whether you realized it or not, you likely saw cars driving over the same bridge and successfully arriving on the other side; that gave you confidence that you would also be able to successfully cross the bridge. It's also likely that you've previously crossed that bridge time and time again on your regular commute and have learned first-hand that you can trust the bridge. For most of us, faith in the bridges on our highway systems has become second nature. More than likely, you've never considered the fact that you had to have faith to cross the bridge. This feeling of faith becoming second nature doesn't minimize your faith. In fact, continually crossing the bridge actually increases your faith in the bridge.

So, where does hope come into the picture? In the scenario with the bridge, hope is simply the idea that you will get to the other side. You hope to get across whatever lies beneath the bridge, and you have faith that the bridge will successfully take you there.

While this idea of faith in a bridge is very basic, the same principle applies to our faith and hope in Christ. Reassurance of faith is what the writer of Hebrews believes will bring his 1st Century audience through their impending persecution. In the last chapter, the writer acknowledges that many of these new Jewish Christians have been persecuted for their faith. He also states that many will endure further persecution, but in the end it's all worth it. The writer has laid out a hope for something better. He wants his audience to remember that God will always keep His promises. For centuries, the Jewish people believed that God would raise up a King that would rule all nations and overthrow the pagan governments of the day. The prophets spoke of the coming Messiah that would set God's people free, but their present reality of Jesus was probably not what they had imagined. Christ had ascended into Heaven over thirty years earlier, and His followers were left here to spread this message amidst intense persecution. This is not the victory the Jewish nation expected with the coming Messiah. So, the writer reminds them about faith in the promises of God.

As he opens the chapter, the writer explains what faith in God really is about. He claims, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). The writer calls his audience to remember the promises of God. The promise that God would bring forth a King and deliver the people from the oppression of pagan rule was a true promise, but maybe God was not done. The writer intends to show how their forefathers put their hope in God and how they lived their lives for something they could not see.

This idea of faith goes all the way back to creation itself. Regardless of whether you believe in the Big Bang Theory or Creation, you have to have faith in either of these two theories. If you believe in the Big Bang Theory, you have to have faith that a few random particles collided together and, eventually, over trillions of years, these particles produced our Solar System. Somehow these particles began to form perfectly round balls that started to rotate around each other. On one of these balls of space matter, particles magically came to life. Over trillions more years, these living particles evolved into what we now know as the most complex object in the universe, a human being.

On the other hand, if you believe in Creation, you believe that God uniquely created everything that we know with the Word of His mouth. God spoke and all creation sprang to life. This audience didn't struggle with evolution verses Creation, they already had faith that God was the creator of the universe. The writer is not asking them to have faith in something unproven or abstract, but the God who creates with His Word.

The writer of Hebrews will continue his message by painting a picture of the faith throughout humanity. He begins with Cain and Abel, the first natural born children on the planet. His purpose is to remind these Jewish Christians that people throughout time have trusted in God. We will also see that complete trust in God did not always mean an earthly reward. These great patriarchs had a hope in something greater than earthly reward, they held fast to the eternal promise of God even when they could not see the end.

We will not discuss each of these great stories in detail, but will look at one of the main stories, Abraham and Isaac. The Hebrews account is found in 11:8-19; the original story is found in Genesis 21-22. God made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of all nations and have descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sands on all the seashores. Abraham was surprised as he and his wife, Sarah, were old and had no children. Abraham had faith in the God, who spoke the universe into existence. While Abraham may not have understood how God would do it, he knew God would keep His promise. God did keep His promise and Isaac was born.

When Isaac was older, God tested Abraham's faith again. He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac! God asked Abraham to take his only son, who we would consider a miracle baby because of Sarah's age, and sacrifice him on an altar. Not only was this Abraham's son, but Isaac was his only descendant. How would God fulfill His promise of making Abraham the father of all nations without a son? So, what does Abraham do in response to God's command? He leaves first thing the next morning to do exactly what God said. We never see Abraham question God. As Abraham and Isaac are on the way to the altar, Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham replied, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Abraham had faith that God would provide. As the story continues, we learn that God does not allow Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God simply used this time to increase Abraham's faith. God provided a ram for the sacrifice in place of Isaac.

This story and the others recorded in Hebrews 11 likely brought much needed encouragement to these persecuted Christians. Like the analogy of the bridge, these stories can be compared to watching other cars cross the bridge before you. The writer shares story after story of people who crossed the bridge in hopes that the stories would build the confidence of these 1st Century Christians. If all of these other great patriarchs can trust God, so can they.

You know, Abraham's faith is very similar to our faith in bridges. We cross the bridges of our highway system every day with little thought of whether we will arrive safely on the other side. Like our faith in bridges, Abraham's faith in God had become an active part of his everyday life. He was so confident in God that he would sacrifice his son if that is what God required. Even though Isaac survived his father's faith test, Abraham never lived long enough to see the vast number of descendants God promised Him. At the end of the chapter, the writer points out that none of the people commended for their faith ever received the fullness of God's promises before they died, but their faith never wavered. One day these promises will be made perfect and every faithful follower from the dawn of creation will see the fulfillment of God's promise.

Our hope is to see these promises fulfilled. In the meantime, what if we began to live like Abraham? How would your life change if you chose to believe fully in God's promises? Consider this the next time you go over a bridge: If the church had the same unwavering faith in God as most of us have in man-made bridges, how would it change our world?

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Personal Study Questions

The purpose of these study questions is to help you get into God's Word. We hope that through a personal encounter with God's Word, He will reveal His Truth and allow you to understand His story first hand.

Chapter 11 is full of stories from the Old Testament that serve as a testimony to great faith in God. This week take time to read these stories in their original context. If you like, take some time to note specific things about the faith displayed in the stories. Most importantly, as you read these stories, take time to see faith in action. Look for signs of this great faith in the lives of the people. May these stories serve as an encouragement to your faith in God.

Cain and Abel's Sacrifice: Genesis 4:1-15

Noah: Genesis 6:11-7:24

Abraham and Isaac: Genesis 21-22

Moses (Early Years): Exodus 2

Moses and the Passover: Exodus 12:1-40

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