

Group Study Outline

LAUNCHING

I remember a non-Christian friend once saying to me: 'I wish I had your faith'. What do you think lies behind that kind of comment? What do they mean by 'faith'?

Our Bible passage tonight will help us be clear about what it means to 'be a believer'.

QUESTIONS

READ 10:35-36

What is the concern that our writer has about those he is writing to?

And what is his confidence about them? (see 6:9)

So why is there now a long chapter describing how believers in the OT lived?

READ 11:1-2 and 39-40

What was commended in 'the people of old'?

What do these verses say about the relationship between ...

'assurance/conviction', 'God's promise' and 'not receiving what was promised'?

We're going to focus on Abraham, and God's promises to him of 'a land' and 'a family'.

READ 11:8-19

What did God promise Abraham about **a land**?

In what ways did Abraham receive/not receive what was promised?

What did he think God had really promised him?

What did God promise Abraham about **a family**?

In what ways did Abraham receive/not receive what was promised?

What made it hard for him to believe God would do what he promised?

What evidence do we have of Abraham's 'assurance/conviction' in these verses?

Why did he live in a tent?

Why did he offer up Isaac?

CONCLUSION

Hebrews has described the promise that we can draw near to God ... right now through Jesus' sacrificial death, and one day as we enter God's heavenly 'rest'.

How will a believer today treat those promises (if we follow Abram's example)?

Why is this a matter of faith (ie conviction about what God has promised, but which we can't see)?

How would this passage help the Jewish Christians who were tempted to return to the more physical, 'real-seeming' Jewish religion?

In what ways are we unlike Abraham (eg by 'putting down roots' in this world)?

How does the story of Isaac (11-12, 17-19) help me when I feel as if all the evidence undermines my conviction about the promises of God?

If we're going to 'stir up one another' (10:24) about these things, what will I be encouraging you to do or to be?

Hebrews 11:1-12:3



Theme of *Hebrews*

Hebrews is written because of an urgent problem: the readers are on the verge of apostasy. Apostasy is the opposite of conversion; it is 'falling away from' or 'throwing away' Christ (3:12; 4:11; 5:6; 10:35). That is the 'sin' in Hebrews, and the 'temptation' they face is 'drift' (2:1). But their drifting is surprisingly not into irreligion, but back into the Jewish faith from which they had converted.

The main argument (to warn them against this drift) is that in Jesus God has spoken his **final word** (chs 1-4) and completed a **finished work** (chs 5-9/10): why go back to the 'shadow' (cf 10:1)? All of *Hebrews*' dense theology is included to serve the main application of this 'word of exhortation' (13:22).

Theme Sentence for 11:1-12:3

Let's emulate the persevering faith of this 'cloud of witnesses' from the OT who acted on God's promises, even though fulfilment was not in sight.

How this passage fits in

Hebrews has encouraged us to 'draw near' ...

- Christians draw near to an unseen Lord right now (through the new and living way opened for us through the sacrificial death of Jesus) ... AND
- Christians draw near to the unknown future of our heavenly 'rest' (and we will make every effort not to 'fall away' before we 'enter' that destination).

Faith is a conviction about both of these: **access** and **arrival** on the basis of God's promise. You want to 'draw near to God'? verse 6 tells us that believers will believe that the unseen Lord is real (even though he can't be seen = 'things not seen' [1]) and that eternal rewards await in an unknown future (even though they can't be seen = 'things hoped for' [1]). In the meantime, today, I 'draw near' to my unknown future as I 'draw near' to my unseen Lord: if I'm not drawing near to him today, what makes me think I'll be drawing near then?

The challenge to these truths is that ...

- the physical temple and its paraphernalia offers a more visible drawing near to the presence of God. It seems more real. But *Hebrews* has argued that all of that old system of temple, priests and sacrifices was always a model of the real reality of what Jesus did. And what he did is 'better'.
- the physical land of Israel seems so much more obviously the promised homeland that the people of God can enjoy right now. It seems more real. But *Hebrews* argues that the physical land (and the promise of it) was always a model of the real reality of the heavenly home. And that is 'better'.

F. F. Bruce writes: 'The better plan which God had made embraces the better hope, the better promises, the better covenant, the better sacrifices, the better and abiding possession, and the better resurrection, which is their heritage, and ours'. A 'better possession' (10:34) and 'something better' (11:40) replaces a mere 'copy of true things' (9:24), a 'shadow of the good things to come' (10:1).

Overview of Hebrews 11

First, some caveats (subverting some common misreadings of the chapter!):

- it's not about defining what faith *is* so much as showing us what faith *does*;
- it's not so much about *faith* as about *believers* (ie people who had faith);
- it's not so much about 'the *life* of faith' as telling about faith-filled people who didn't fall away when they faced *death* (cf 11:4, 5, 7, 11-12, 13, 17-19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25-26, 29, 30, 31, 33-34, 35-38!);
- it's not an isolated chapter about 'faith' so much as a vital step in the argument of this entire 'word of exhortation' (13:22): so keep asking why we're being told this at this point in *Hebrews*.

If we are not to be one of 'those who shrink back and are destroyed' (10:39), we need to be clear what it means to 'endure' (10:36) and to have 'faith' (10:39). *Hebrews* has already warned us about the danger of 'an unbelieving heart' (3:12) because such 'unbelief' (3:19) is why God, in his anger, swore that the original generation that came out of Egypt would never enter his rest. The word translated 'unbelief' (in 3:12, 19) is literally the word 'no-faith'; Hebrews 11 tells us about the opposite to that ... the 'faith' we need to have.

The OT gives us example after example of people who did keep going as believers - 'a cloud of witnesses' to help us 'run with endurance' (12:1). Of course, our position is not identical to those heroes (because, not least, we are in 'the days' of the new covenant referred to in 8:8ff) ... but the day-to-day experience of what it means to 'be a believer' is the same. Actually, of course, Jesus is the very best example of someone who lived by faith (12:2).

The main point in Hebrews 11

So, the main theme of this chapter is the one that we've consistently seen: Christians are being urged to carry on being believers ... 'be a believer TODAY!'

The key thing is that a believer lives not on the basis of what he sees, but out of a firm conviction of what God has promised. And we believe that what God has promised us is 'something better' (40) than everything in this world.

The example of Abraham (in 8-18) is perhaps the clearest:

- Abraham was promised 'a place' as his inheritance (8)
- he went there (tho' he couldn't see it when the promise was made) (8b-9a)
- when he got to it, he lived in a tent (in other words, in temporary accommodation) because he thought of this place as a temporary home (9)
- he had received the thing that was promised but he did not think he had received the thing that was promised (*read that again!*) (13-15)
- he was looking forward to the real land he was promised, which is a 'heavenly' and permanent home (10, 16).

People with such a conviction are able to endure hard things in this world:

- fierce opposition, even to the extreme of being 'sawn in two' (36-38);
- deprivation of 'the treasures of Egypt' (26), for they are nothing more than 'the fleeting pleasures of sin';
- even the inexplicable, seemingly-contradictory command of God (17-19).

With such conviction, as we 'consider' Jesus and all the hostility that he too experienced in this world (12:2), we can endure the hard things and not give up.

Commentary for 11:8-19

- 8 This chapter follows the story of the whole OT from the word-that-preceded-creation (3) to the prophets (33-38): the thing that all the examples share is that they 'were commended for their faith, but did not receive what was promised' (39). That must be our control for understanding Abraham too.

These next verses focus on two promises God made to Abraham (which he similarly 'did not receive'):

- **land** (8-10, 13-16)
- **family** (11-12, 17-18)

- 9 **Abraham was promised a land** (cf Gen 12:1 to see that this is exactly how his story starts), which he was to 'receive' as his inheritance. Of course, he 'did not receive' it (39): by the time he died, the only bit of real estate there that he actually owned was his burial ground (Gen 23; 25:7-10).

- 10 Tents symbolise (as we might say) not putting down roots. The fact that Abraham lived in a tent shows that he was always looking forward to 'a city that has foundations' (somewhere properly built to become his permanent home), a heavenly country (16). Of course, remember that those who were already in the land did live in cities (and Lot ended up joining them there): they were the ones who looked like the permanent dwellers. Abraham did not.

- 13 'These' are all the first mentioned patriarchs (ie Abel, Enoch and Noah too). None of them thought of earth as their 'homeland' ... their desire was not for the earthly land they were leaving behind, but for the heavenly country towards which they were headed. The 'city' (10, 16) is the one God has designed, built and prepared: it is his 'rest' (4:3-11). Abraham took the promise of God and lived his life making every effort to enter that rest.

- 11 **Abraham was promised a family.** There are translation difficulties in 11-12 (is it referring to Sarah's faith or to Abraham's? ... it could be read either way). But the point is: God promised that Sarah would conceive (and she did) even though she was past it, and he was 'as good as dead'! But (as 13 explains) this elderly couple did not actually come to see the full fulfilment of 'descendants as many as the stars' ... they only saw the very first few of what would become a mighty dynasty. What they (and all these people) did 'see' (13) was only what they 'saw from afar', perhaps a 'foresight' to glimpse the promised 'things not seen' (1).

- 17-18 sets out the tension of promise and command, which the writer makes even more extreme by saying that Abraham actually 'offered up Isaac', (when it didn't quite get that far in Gen 22:1-14!). Facing the hard thing of the potential death of Isaac might challenge God's promise, but it wasn't going to weaken Abraham's faith: he was 'sure' (1) that, whatever happened, God would keep his promise. God was capable of raising the dead, and if Isaac was the promised one and yet killed, God could and would bring Isaac back from the dead to keep his word. So, in Gen 22:13f, Isaac is indeed, 'figuratively speaking', received back from the dead.

Application

- be a believer today ... like Abraham (see *Theme Sentence*)