

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL LETTERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE THE GOD WHO CHANGES US *Once Faithless – Now Faith-Filled*

Our Letters to God’s People conclude with a study taken from the roll call of faith in **Hebrews 11** which happens to be one of my favorite single chapters of the Bible since it provides so many beautiful snapshots of God’s people in the Old Testament who lived by faith. The book of **Hebrews** was written to a group in New Testament times who were in danger of wavering in their faith.

The author of Hebrews is not identified and 2,000 years later the author’s identity is still a mystery. Many believe that Paul was the author. In fact, older versions of the Bible credit its authorship to Paul while more recently printed Bibles list its authorship as being unknown. Some believe Hebrews to have originally been a sermon that Paul preached and was later transcribed by Luke or someone else. Some credit the book to Apollos; others think Barnabas; However, this is for certain: the letter to the Hebrews was God-breathed and Jesus is the Author and Finisher of our faith!

Defining Faith

Read Hebrews 11:1-2 (ESV) ¹ *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*
² *For by it the people of old received their commendation.*

I love the KJV version of verse 1 best. **Hebrews 11:1 (KJV)** ¹ *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* In fact, when asked for a definition this verse always comes to my mind. A more modern way of defining faith is with the acrostic FAITH – **F**orsaking **A**ll **I** Trust **H**im! Our faith in Christ is what allows us to move confidently into the realm of the unseen. In the natural realm, we say, ‘seeing is believing.’ In the spiritual realm we say, ‘believing is seeing.’ When we choose to believe what God says is true, we will possess a faith that works! Not everyone possesses such a faith. Many people look at faith like a little girl who defined faith as ‘believing what you know ain’t so.’ Then there are others (like the televangelists) who look at faith as being an ‘open sesame’ to a new world. They contend that if you only have enough faith ‘good things’ will happen for you. And, if good things don’t happen, you just didn’t have enough faith! James, the brother of Jesus explained in **James 1:2-4 (ESV)** ² *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,* ³ *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* ⁴ *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

Do you have God’s assurance about things you cannot see when the cares and trials of this life weigh you down? Having that assurance will enable you to pray boldly and confidently. **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

No Old Testament worshiper would have been bold enough to enter in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. Even the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies only once a year. We can know our faith is a faith that works because we can go directly to the Throne of Grace and Almighty God will hear and answer our prayers. We don't always get the answers we want, but we can be confident that our Father hears and we will always receive the answers we need.

We must be vigilant in all phases of life since it is often the good times that tend to cause us to take our focus away from God. Frequently, it is the difficult times that bring us closer to Him; even though the Tempter loves for our troubles to cause us to doubt our faith. Many can testify that during times of great stress, they have experienced God's presence in a magnificence way. Knowing that Jesus is with us in our suffering and that He will return one day to put an end to all pain helps us grow in our faith and our relationship with Him.

When you learn to walk by faith you will 'see the invisible' in the same way that the heroes of the Old Testament did.

Exemplifying faith

Read Hebrews 11:3-7 (ESV) ³ *By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.* ⁴ *By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.* ⁵ *By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.* ⁶ *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* ⁷ *By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*

There are two explanations for the origin of this universe. One is speculation, and the other is revelation. By faith we accept the revelation of God Himself telling us that He spoke this universe into being. Speculation has many theories, and many are abandoned as the years go by. By far the most popular theory in science today is the big bang theory, also known as a cosmic cataclysm. The idea is that the universe came into existence at a certain point in time roughly 15 to 20 billion years ago. A person could go crazy reading all the theories out there. This is what I believe: *By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.*

The hall of faith begins with **Abel** – the second generation of mankind – the son of Adam and Eve. Abel is the first martyr for his faith. He worshiped and obeyed God and his faith cost him his life. And yet, Abel still witnesses to us today. How glorious is that!

The next member in the hall of faith, **Enoch**, is remembered because he pleased God! How did he do that? The Bible explains: *without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* Enoch simply walked in his faith. The Bible also tells us

that Enoch was taken to heaven one day (translated – carried across) and seen no more. Some see in the translation of Enoch as a picture of the ‘catching away’ of the church when Jesus Christ returns. Abel died a violent death, but Enoch never died picturing how God has a different plan for each one who trusts Him.

Enoch’s son, Methuselah (the oldest man who ever lived) was the great-grandfather of **Noah**. Noah’s place in the hall of faith is recorded because he had a faith that feared and obeyed God. **Proverbs 9:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

Next, the writer of Hebrews speaks of **Abraham** and his immediate family. We could easily do an entire study on the faith of Abraham including the times that his faith faltered. However, I will just quote James again: **James 2:23 (ESV)** ²³ *and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.*

Read Hebrews 11:13-16 (ESV) ¹³ *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*

The writer tells that: *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.* This ties the folks in the hall of faith directly to verse 1: *faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* These were real life people who personally experienced the truth that believing is seeing!

The *land* they were *thinking of* was clearly not Mesopotamia, the land Abraham left. The Tyndale Commentary mentions that the land they left behind had reached a much more advanced stage of civilization than the land of Canaan to which they went. We are told exactly what Abraham was looking for in **Hebrews 11:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.* Still today we are waiting and looking for the same city – we know its name – it is the New Jerusalem. It is the City that John saw in **Revelation 21:2 (ESV)** ² *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

Sometimes we are tempted to waiver in faith longing for the ‘good ole days’. This most often happens when loved ones reach the shores of heaven ahead of us and we find ourselves ‘left behind’. When that happens, focus like the people in the hall of faith did – look forward to your heavenly home with the eyes of faith. It will be a much better country than the place we now reside.

Time does not permit us to look at all the heroes. We will instead turn to some of their remarkable feats of endurance.

Read Hebrews 11:35-40 (ESV) ³⁵ *Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.* ³⁶ *Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.* ³⁷ *They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—* ³⁸ *of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.* ³⁹ *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,* ⁴⁰ *since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

Steadfast faith in God does not necessary guarantee a happy, carefree life; however, know this concerning your relationship with Jesus: **1 Peter 1:8 (ESV)** ⁸ *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,*

While we are on earth, we will face things that we may never understand on this side of eternity. Nevertheless, we can live in faith that God will keep His promises to us. Such as **Isaiah 43:2 (ESV)** ² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*

When suffering and problems occur, it is human to say, ‘Why me?’ It displays our faith when we respond ‘Why not me?’ The truth is God has purpose for allowing some of His children to become martyrs for the faith like Abel, and while others may walk peacefully for the most part through life like Enoch. Either way – God is searching for faith that endures.

Enduring Faith

Read Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV) ¹ *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,* ² *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

We often wonder if loved ones in heaven can look down and see us. Some use this verse to answer that question with a ‘yes’. In fact, thinking this at one time gave me great comfort.

However, after years of Bible study and reading trusted commentators, I have come to accept that most likely the proper interpretation of **Hebrews 12:1** is that the men and women mentioned in **Hebrews 11** and those men and women of faith who have come after including those we have personally loved form the “great cloud of witnesses” as witness to us concerning the value of living our life by faith. Gotquestions.org has this comment, “The Bible doesn’t specifically say that people in heaven *cannot* look down on us, so we can’t be dogmatic. However, it is unlikely that they can. People in heaven are likely preoccupied with other things such as worshipping God and enjoying the glories of heaven.” I did feel as if my mother was looking down witnessing the first service when we moved into our church’s new sanctuary a number of years ago. As wonderful as that feeling was at the time, it is more important to know that Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, is looking down from His throne and even more important that He lives within each believer’s heart!