

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen

What exactly does Hebrew 11:1, the title of this article, mean? The author of Hebrews indicates that faith is: 1) an assurance of things hoped for, and 2) the conviction of things not seen. Since both of these clauses are subjective determinations, a study of this verse in isolation would suggest that faith could have a different meaning to each individual and have no basis in fact.

Hebrews 11, concluding the discussion of Jesus Christ as the Son of God / High Priest mediator of the New Covenant fulfiller of the Mosaic Law, is devoted entirely to developing the meaning of faith, providing an objective foundation for its definition, and showing what a life of faith looks like.

What Faith Means

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Heb 11:1-3)

Hebrews 11 sets out that faith is the means by which the earliest men gained the approval of God. While no man witnessed the creation of earth, faith is the belief in the real existence of God and a trust that He created something out of nothing, because He said so. This trust in God's word and His promises is the basis for the conviction of things not seen and the assurance of things hoped for.

What a Life of Faith Means for Men Who Spoke with God

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. (Heb 11:4)

While Abel offered the firstlings of his flock, Cain failed to bring the first fruits of the ground (Gen 4:3-5). This demonstration of faith, that engenders obedience, is the basis of God's determination of Abel's righteousness and reference as an example in the New Testament.

"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of **righteous Abel** to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (Matt 23:34-36; Luke 11:50-52)

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for **he who comes to God must believe that He is** and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. (Heb 11:5-6)

Of all the men mentioned before Noah (Gen 5), only Enoch was described as the one who "walked with God," and this point was made twice. The author of Hebrews uses Enoch as an example of one who seeks God and knew of His memorial name "I AM" before He revealed it later to Moses (Ex 3:14-15). God's personal name, which can be understood as "I AM HE WHO EXISTS," expresses the reality of His existence.

Then **Enoch walked with God** three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had other sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. **Enoch walked with God**; and he was not, for God took him. (Gen 5:22-25)

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God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations. (Ex 3:14-15)

By faith Noah, **being warned by God about things not yet seen**, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. (Heb 11:7)

Like Enoch, Noah "walked with God." Warning Noah that He will destroy life on earth, God gives instructions on how to build an ark. Amidst his neighbors, Noah and his sons take roughly 50-70 years to construct the ark, because he trusted God's word and obeyed.

These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; **Noah walked with God.** (Gen 6:9)

Thus Noah did; according to all that God had commanded him, so he did. (Gen 6:22)

What a Life of Faith Means for the Patriarchs

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. (Heb 11:8-12)

Coming from a pagan family (Josh 24:2), Abraham is lauded for recognizing the One true God, listening to His voice and placing a trust in His command to leave his home, go to an unknown land, and become an alien (Gen 12:1-4). When Abraham asks how he will know he will possess the land, God makes an unconditional and unilateral covenant (Gen 15:1-21).

Of all the names mentioned, Hebrews 11 devotes the most time on the faith of Abraham. In mentioning that Isaac and Jacob were fellow heirs of the same promise, the author of Hebrews is alluding to another aspect of Abraham's faith: 1) Abraham had a genuine relationship with God which included making promises and depending on Him, and 2) Abraham knew of the importance of passing down his worldview, that God is real and His word is trustworthy.

Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.'" (Gen 14:22-23)

For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (Gen 18:19)

Apart from the land, Hebrews 11 mentions the second most significant promise that God made to Abraham: 1) Sarah, his wife, will bear a son, and 2) he will be blessed with innumerable descendants. To confirm this blessing, God appears before Abraham (Gen 17:1), changes the names of Abram and Sarai, and uses circumcision as a sign of the covenant between them (Gen 17:11); circumcision becomes the tangible evidence to all that God is a living Being.

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All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 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 a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16)

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob never saw the complete fulfillment of God's promises; however, certain aspects of the covenant, such as descendants, made them aware that God's promises included a view into the distant future. The real physical existence of God (i.e. God appears to Isaac [Gen 26:2] and Jacob [Gen 32:24-30; 35:9]) provided the confidence and assurance that God will fulfill His promises even though it may be beyond their earthly perception.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb 11:17-19)

The offering of his firstborn by Abraham (Gen 22:1-18) is significant to the discussion on faith. Here the author of Hebrews places an emphasis on obedience; genuine faith recognizes the reality of the omnipotent God and engenders deferential respect and compliance to His word.

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." (Gen 22:1-2)

Then the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." (Gen 22:15-18)

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones. (Heb 11:20-22)

Isaac, apparently aware of God's prophecy of "one people shall be stronger than the other" and "the older serving the younger" (Gen 25:23), blesses Jacob (Gen 27:27-29) and Esau accordingly (Gen 27:39-40).

Jacob, aware of God's prophecy that the whole family will bow down to Joseph (Gen 37:5-11), makes a special blessing to Joseph's two sons and claims them as his own so that each would receive an inheritance (Gen 48:1-22; Josh 16:1-9).

Joseph, aware of the land which God promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, wanted to be buried in the Promised Land which he trusted would exist (Gen 50:24-26).

What a Life of Faith Means for the Old Testament Believer

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them. (Heb 11:23-28)

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By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. (Heb 11:29-31)

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. (Heb 11:32-38)

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40)

Numerous Old Testament people came to believe in the real existence of the living God by: a) personally seeing and hearing Him, b) personally witnessing His mighty works, or c) learning of Him from a trusted source whether a person or God's word. Their faith was established when they placed their trust in His words and promises, and this gained the approval of God.

It is through their acts of obedience to God's word, whether they suffered or thrived, Old Testament Believers were deemed righteous by God. And while none of the Old Testament Believers ever saw the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, they were confident that God will fulfill them in the future.

With the advent of Jesus Christ, this understanding of faith is the same. Numerous New Testament people came to believe in the real existence of the living God by: a) personally seeing and hearing His Son, b) personally witnessing the mighty works of His Son, or c) learning of His Son from a trusted source whether a person or God's word. Their faith was established when they placed their trust in His words and promises through His Son, and this gained the approval of God.