

Living by Faith

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Hebrews 11:1-16

My Study Bible calls the book of Hebrews “the book of better things.” “The two Greek words for ‘better’ or ‘superior’ occur 15 times in the letter.” The writer begins by saying that “in the past God spoke to our forefathers at many times and in various ways, but] in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” That’s so much “better” because “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” (Hebrews 11:1-3).

Throughout the first 10 chapters the writer shows that Christ is superior to the angels, God’s messengers, superior to Moses, God’s spokesman, superior to the priests who served for thousands of years, and superior to all the sacrifices they offered. To put an exclamation point on that in chapter 10 he says “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (vs. 11-14).

In the light of God’s supreme revelation in Christ, the author calls for faith, not faith that flashes on and off like a strobe light, not faith that fades in a fight, but faith that lasts all the way to death. “You need to persevere” he says at the end of chapter 10, “so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a little while, ‘He who is coming will come and not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith, and I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back’” (vs. 36-38). “O for a Faith That Will Not Shrink” says an old hymn.

Chapter 11 begins with a definition of faith and then tells stories to illustrate what living by faith looks like. Here’s the definition: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see.” I learned it from the more poetic King James Version: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” One Bible scholar says “faith is the organ which enables us to see the invisible order.” The Apostle Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, “I pray...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you” (Ephesians 1:18). But if faith is a spiritual organ, it’s also a spiritual muscle that must be exercised to be effective, as these stories illustrate.

“By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.” Genesis 4 says that Cain was a farmer and Abel kept flocks. So Cain brought some of his crops as a sacrifice. Abel brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (Genesis 4:3-4). There’s a clue there as to why God was pleased with the one and not the other, but Abel’s offering was “better” primarily not because of what he brought but who he was. In Matthew 23 Jesus says Abel was a “righteous” man. The Bible’s definition of a “righteous” person is someone who loves God and lives according to God’s will. The Apostle John says that Cain killed his brother “because his actions were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12). When Abel offered his sacrifice it was from a heart that belonged to God, an expression of his love and devotion. Cain, on the other hand, had a heart problem. He had congestive heart failure. Not in a medical sense, but his heart was so congested with anger and jealousy toward Abel there was no room to love God, much less his brother. His sacrifice was an empty exercise because his heart was not right with God.

“By faith he [Abel] still speaks, even though he is dead” (vs. 4b). What does he say? The same thing that the prophet Micah said: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The second example of living by faith is Enoch (see Genesis 5:18-24). The writer says that Enoch “pleased God?” How do you “please God”? Here’s the answer: “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” To live by faith is to believe in and long for God, like David in Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek

you, my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (vs. 1) The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7). God told the exiles in Babylon “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). Not much is said about Enoch in the book of Genesis but what is said speaks volumes. “Enoch walked faithfully with God, and then he was no more because God took him away” (Genesis 5:24). “Enoch walked faithfully with God” and then one day he walked right into God’s arms.

The third example of living by faith is Noah. Here’s what Genesis 6 says about Noah: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.” Noah stands out as someone who lived by faith both because of his character and his actions. “By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family [and a lot of animals].” It’s such a spare statement, isn’t it? But for Noah, it was a big deal. He spent years building a huge boat on dry land, and every time he was asked what he was doing he had the opportunity to testify. Maybe one reason it took so long to build the ark was that whenever he was asked about it he would put down his tools and talk about God.

I believe there was an ark but I also think of the ark as a metaphor. We are all called to be ark-builders, not with cypress wood as God commanded Noah but with the wood of a cross. The Apostle Paul was an ark builder. He writes “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Rev. Jacob Eppinga, long time pastor of this church, died in 2008. Before he died he and I had planned his funeral together and he asked me to preach on that text. The cross of Christ was central to his life and ministry. Like Paul he was an ark-builder.

The fourth example of living by faith is Abraham and Sarah. Genesis 12 says “Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” He left his home in Mesopotamia and set out for...someplace. If he had had a GPS it wouldn’t have worked because he didn’t have a destination. Yet, he did have a destination; his destination was God. Wherever God would lead him; that was his destination. He believed God, he trusted God, he obeyed God; he loved God.

Later on when God had revealed to him that the land of Canaan was his “promised land” he lived there but he never owned an acre of it, except for a small burial plot he bought when Sarah died and paid an exorbitant price. He and Sarah and eventually his son Isaac and grandson Jacob lived in tents. They were “strangers and aliens” in the very land God had promised to them.

Did Abraham want to settle down in Canaan? Yes, but even if he could have built a city there, it would never be his true home, any more than where we live, whether it be humble or palatial is our true home. The “promised land” is not Israel, it’s not America or anywhere else, it’s God. “Our citizenship is in heaven,” says the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3. “And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ...” With the limited revelation that he had, Abraham already had his heart set on that destination, so if he had to live in tents, it was okay because “he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” It was this city John saw in a vision, “the holy city, the new Jerusalem,” where God will dwell with his people and “wipe every tear from their eyes.” In his Confessions Augustine wrote, “My heart is restless, Lord, until it rests in you.” Abraham could relate.

The second thing God promised Abraham and Sarah was children, heirs of the promise. But there was a slight problem, they didn’t have any and they were beyond normal child-bearing years. Yet they believed God, not always perfectly; sometimes they laughed at the notion that they would have a son in their declining years, but with imperfect faith they held on to the promise, and sure enough, Sarah give birth to Isaac, whose name means “laughter” when she was 90 and Abraham was 100. “And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.” And we, by grace are among them.

Now here's the punchline of all these stories but especially the story of Abraham and Sarah and their family. "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth...they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (vs. 13-16). And what a city it is!

Faith did not keep them alive but it kept their hope alive until they died. What a legacy they left! Little did they know that their names would be in a kind of faith hall of fame in the Holy Scriptures as examples of people who, as they approached death were still trusting, still loving, still serving, still obeying, still caring, still longing for their heavenly home.

And remember "all these people" lived at a time when God's revelation had not yet fully unfolded. We have a huge advantage over Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah because the Son who is "the radiance of God's glory," has risen upon us.

We will soon enter a year of unknowns. Like Abraham we will enter it not knowing where we are going. But God does and God is faithful. What legacy will you leave when you die? I can't think of a better one than this, "All these people were still living by faith when they died." May it be true of us!

Prayer: O Lord, help us to live by faith: to love you with all our heart, soul and mind, to serve you with all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Give us the desire and the power to have confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

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