

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Power for Christian Living: The Power of Faith

When I was at school I developed an interest in art which was fostered by my art teacher. One day he arranged to take our class to the local art gallery. It was a visit I have always remembered. We went from room to room looking at the great pictures hanging from the high walls. Each one told its own story. The longer you looked at a work of art the more you discovered about what the artist had painted.

In Hebrews 11, Paul takes us into God's picture gallery of faith. We are invited to look back at the lives of great men and women of God. The longer we look, the more we discover about the remarkable power of faith displayed in their lives. Their faith is all the more remarkable because they did not have the completed scriptures as we do. They had no knowledge of a risen, glorified Christ as we have. They had not experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit's permanent and abiding presence as the Church has since Pentecost. But, in of all this, their lives teach us what it means to simply trust God.

What is also interesting is that the characters listed in the chapter were not without their faults. There is no doubt that they made many mistakes - sometimes big mistakes. But when their lives are recorded in this chapter, we see only faith. I have always remembered the words of a dear Christian in his nineties who said Hebrews 11 is not about the FAILURES of God's people but about the FAITH of God's people. This teaches us something important about how God looks upon His people. He sees us through Christ. Our Father rejoices in His children's faith and He deals quietly with our failures. It would be good if we encouraged the good we see in the lives of our fellow Christians rather than dwelling, as we sometimes do, on their failings.

This morning I would like to look at the features of faith in the lives of some of the main characters referred to in this chapter. It seems to me that God was not simply saying these people had faith but that, in each of their stories, the power of faith was demonstrated in an important and distinctive way. And, that in looking at the ways in which they trusted in God, we are helped to a more simple and direct trust in God amidst the unbelief that surrounds us in today's world.

We start in verse 4 with Abel. Abel had the faith to **approach** God. Cain and Abel present different approaches to God. Cain approached God on the basis of the fruit of the land he farmed. He came to God offering the efforts of his own labour - a picture of good works. Abel, on the other hand, came to God on the basis of the substitutional death of another. Such a sacrifice was not new. When Abel's father and mother sinned and were cast out of the Garden of Eden, it was God who made the first sacrifice. He killed the animals to clothe Adam and Eve as they entered a world outside of Eden. Abel had learned, either by direct revelation or by listening to his parents, that the way to God was not on the basis of the relative goodness of his life but upon the death of another. Abel points us to the sacrifice of Christ Himself who would come into the world as the Saviour and sacrifice Himself upon the cross. Christ took our place and died in our stead. He was the great substitute and the only way to God. He could say, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me". John 14:6. We approach God in this way for salvation and we continue to approach God throughout our lives on the basis of grace. The Christ who died for us, now lives for us in heaven. And we are invited to approach God through Him. "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:16.

In verse 5 of our chapter we meet Enoch. Enoch had the faith to **please** God. He was remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, because he walked with God (Genesis 5:24) or, as it says in this chapter, he pleased God. Secondly, he did not die.

When Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan, the Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a dove and the Father's voice was heard from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" Matthew 3:17. At a conference a couple of years ago, I raised the question what would happen if the heaven opened over my head. What would God say? I doubt He would be well pleased with my life. But, on the other hand, we all have the potential to please God. For example in Philippians 4:18, Paul speaks about the Philippians support as being "well pleasing to God." And in Hebrews 13:20 and 21, he asks for the God of peace to "make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight."

It has been said that Enoch enjoyed such a close relationship with God that one day God said to Enoch, "Instead of going home, come to My house" and He took him home to heaven. It is a nice way to think of how Enoch, the first man to be raptured, entered heaven without dying. It is also a telling picture of how the power to live for God is linked to our communion with God. This is the power of faith. As the next verse says, "But 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 diligently seek Him." In a world that is increasingly materialistic, we are to live a life of faith, believing in an unseen God and walking in daily communion with Him throughout the whole course of our lives. We cannot please God unless we trust Him. Enoch lived in daily communion with God. If we are to know real blessing in our lives, we must go into God's presence. Jesus said to His disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" John 15:5.

Our next character is Noah in verse 7. Noah had the faith to **serve** God. Noah is remarkable because he served God for so long without gaining one convert. Only Noah's family went into the Ark. Yet his faith remained resolute. Like Enoch, the power of his life came from walking with God. He preached righteousness although no one listened apart from his own children. Service can sometimes seem a fruitless occupation. It can seem that no one listens or understands. The Lord Jesus had the experience of seeing little response to His own ministry at times. But God does not assess our lives on the basis of our apparent success but upon our willingness to be faithful servants. Today we live in the world of league tables. Endless attempts are made to try to measure levels of success and, by implication, failure. God is the true Judge of our service and He judges perfectly. He alone knows the effort, tears, disappointments and trials we go through in trying to serve Him. And He values what we do for Him.

We should not forget Noah saved his family. It is a challenge to Christians that, in our endeavour to serve others, our families are not neglected. Noah saved his family and we should always keep in balance the responsibilities we have to our children as well as to the wider community.

There is one person who is mentioned in relation to the power of faith more than any other – Abraham in verse 6. Abraham had the faith to **obey** God. He simply believed God and was willing to start out on a path not knowing where it would lead him. All great men and women of faith have been able to trust God in this way. A simple example was Gladys Alyward. As an uneducated young Christian employed as a cleaner, she was convinced that God was calling her to serve Him in China. She approached the China Inland Mission but was rejected. Undaunted, she saved every week until she had the fare to take the Trans-Siberian rail journey to China. Her astonishing story is told in the book "The London Sparrow". We are not all called to China but we are called to obey God. Obedience is something all Christians struggle with. Its simplicity confounds us. But on those rare occasions when, by one circumstance or another, we are forced to have complete faith in God, we discover the joy knowing God really does respond to our trust in Him.

Like Noah, Abraham's faith was shared by his wife, Sarah, verse 11. If you read Sarah's story in Genesis 18, you will see she laughed at the news that she would become a mother in her old age. Hardly an action of faith you would think. But later, when Isaac, whose name means "He laughs", is born, Sarah says, "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me". This was the joy of faith. Sarah understood the work of God in her life and the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham in Isaac. She had the faith to **receive** from God and rejoice in what He accomplished in her.

This is an important aspect of faith. We need to have the faith to **receive**. In Malachi 3, God says to His people, "try Me now in this, says the LORD of hosts, If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it." The spirit of this is seen in 2 Kings 4 when Elisha asks the widow who was in debt what she has in the house. She had nothing but a jar of oil. He tells her to borrow vessels from everywhere and to fill them with the oil from the jar. She did not run out of oil but she did run out of vessels to fill! Only then did the flow of oil stop. She had faith to receive. We do not often think of this side of faith perhaps and we need to ask God to make us able to receive the blessing He wants to give us through faith.

The chapter tells us Abraham did not know where he was going when God first tested his faith. Verse 17 recalls Genesis 22. On that occasion God told Abraham exactly where He wanted him to go what He wanted him to do. Abraham had to go to the Land of Moriah and sacrifice Isaac on one of the mountains there. It was the greatest test of Abraham's remarkable faith. God impressed upon His dear servant that he was to take his only son, whom he loved, and sacrifice him. Abraham never questioned the path God asked him to tread. He never doubted the God who gave him a son and who now asked him to sacrifice Isaac, the one in whom all the promises of God were to be fulfilled. He had learned to utterly trust the God who had always led him in the right way. And he had the faith to **sacrifice** to God. Our chapter gives us a fresh insight into the Old Testament story. Paul writes in verse 19 that Abraham had concluded that God was able to raise up his son from the dead. In the end, God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. The story teaches us several important things: that true faith rests entirely upon God; that God sometimes tests our faith to sacrifice without requiring us to do so; that a complete belief in God's will and purposes and a willingness to live a sacrificial life of service are at the centre of a life of faith. The story also teaches us that God,

through Abraham, was demonstrating a sacrifice that God Himself would make in the gift of His only Son Jesus Christ whom He loved. In the first book in the Bible, through the testing of Abraham's faith, God foretold the time when Jesus, in response to the Father's will and in love for us, would become the sacrifice for the sin of the world and that He would rise again.

In having the faith to sacrifice we continually witness the grace of God. God is the God of sacrifice and we are a people of sacrifice.

We should not forget Isaac is in this story. His faith was remarkable. He never resisted the circumstances he found himself, in but calmly submitted to them. He is a willing victim who, in figure, was raised out of a position of death to become a blessing to others (verse 20). Isaac foreshadowed Christ who came to do the Father's will and submit Himself to the death of the Cross. "Not my will but Yours be done" and "The cup that My Father has given me shall I not drink it" were His words as He approached the cross. But having gone through the death of the cross, Jesus comes out in resurrection as the One who blesses and still blesses today.

The faith to **bless** is mentioned both in regard to Isaac and to Jacob in verses 20 and 21. This is a wonderful aspect of the power of faith. It is one thing to be blessed and another to be a blessing. Jacob, as a young man, wanted to be blessed. He tricked his older brother out of his birthright and was encouraged by his mother to deceive Isaac into blessing him above Esau. On the night he left his home in fear of Esau, he found himself alone at Bethel with a stone for a pillow. God appeared to him that night in a wonderful dream in which He promised to be with Jacob and bring him safely home. It took twenty painful years in the house of Laban before Jacob made the return journey. Having sent his servants and family ahead of him, he found himself once more alone with God. That night he wrestled with God, eventually pleading with God to bless him. God gave him a new name, Israel – a prince - and blessed him. Jacob had the faith to ask God to bless him and for the rest of his life he became a blessing to others. He blessed Esau; he blessed Pharaoh, the greatest monarch in the world; he blessed his sons and he blessed his grand children. His life was transformed from selfishness to selflessness.

God wants to transform us into Christians who know His blessing and, as a result, are a blessing to others. It occurred to me a little while ago that the humble teapot, which we use every day without thinking too much about it, was made for two things. It was made to receive and to give. It receives the teabags and the boiling water. It gives a refreshing cuppa. When I thought about it more deeply, it reminded me of our lives. Christians are also made to receive and to give. God blesses us through faith and we need the faith to be a blessing to others. Think of the experiences you have had of God's goodness. Think about how you can pass on to others in words, kindness, sympathy and care, the blessing of God. I was at a business meeting the other day and a lady was describing one of her projects. The idea was a simple one. People donated goods for others to use – furniture, toys, books, clothes etc. It was called "pass it on". That is exactly what Jacob did when God blessed him and it is what we need to do.

But Hebrews does not only record the fact that Jacob had faith to bless others. It also tells us he had faith to **worship** (verse 21). We are not only made to bless our fellow believers and neighbours, but we are made to worship. Jesus explained to the woman at Sychar's well in John 4 that the Father is seeking worshippers (verse 23). We might have thought of Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Moses as great worshippers. Of course they were. But God chooses Jacob, the transformed man, who could speak of God as the "God who shepherded me all the days of my life." Jacob who, as a young man, so misunderstood the character of God yet in later years had such a profound understanding of His grace. Every step Jacob took after Penuel was a reminder of the day he met God and God blessed him. He became the man who built altars to worship God and who ended his days as a worshipper. True men and woman of faith are true worshippers. If we do not make time to worship God, we can never truly serve Him. Great workers start by being great worshippers. Think of David - a psalmist before he met Goliath. Think of the early Christians who began the week remembering the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread. They came together to worship, then they went out to serve. That is God's order. When God arranged for His people to come out of captivity to rebuild Jerusalem, the first thing they did was surprising. They did not rebuild the walls to protect themselves. They started to rebuild the temple to worship God! So often we get the order wrong. We want to get out and do things for God. This, of course, is so important. But God wants us first to come into His presence to worship Him. We need faith to worship.

The last person whose faith I want to comment on is Joseph, verse 22. He is one of the most remarkable men in the Bible. Early in his life, he had the sense of closeness to God. Like the Lord Jesus, he suffered at the hands of his brethren and was sold into slavery. But God was with him. God protected Joseph in Potiphar's house and in prison, blessing everything he did. Ultimately, Joseph came out of prison, not only to interpret Pharaoh's dream, but to transform his kingdom. He was a man, who by God's grace, developed the greatest nation on earth at that time. And, in saving the kingdom from famine, he was able to save his own family and once more see his father who loved him so dearly. He did all of this by God's hand. You would think there were so many things Joseph achieved which could have been recorded in Hebrews to describe his faith. The most surprising is the one that we read about. He gave instruction concerning his bones (Genesis 50:25). You might be forgiven for asking why this was so important. It was important because it shows us that Joseph looked to the future. Although he lived such an effective life in Egypt, his

heart was in the Promised Land. He had faith to **hope**. He looked into the future when his people would leave Egypt and return to the land God gave them. He believed in the promises of God. And, sure enough, when Moses left Egypt on that Passover night, he took the remains of Joseph with him. It has been said that Joseph had the longest funeral in history. It lasted over forty years! As the children of Israel travelled through the wilderness, Joseph went everywhere with them. Until at last Joshua took them into the Promised Land and the great man of God was buried at Shechem (Joshua 24:32).

Christianity is characterised by three things - Faith, Hope and Love. The greatest of these is love, which is eternal. Faith will give way to sight and hope will be fulfilled. But now, not only is faith active, but hope is also active. We need to have the faith to hope. The Bible, of course, uses the word hope in an entirely different way to its present day use. Hope today means something we would like to happen but there is no certainty it will. The hope of the Christian in the Bible refers to something which is future but absolutely certain. Joseph believed with all certainty that God would lead His people to the Promised Land and he prepared for that event. We believe that one day Christ is coming again and in the words of the apostle Paul, "we shall always be with the Lord." (1 Thessalonians 4:17). In the words of John, "we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). This is a purifying hope, "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." (1 John 3:3). And, of course, the Lord Jesus Himself said, "I will come again and receive you to Myself" John 14:3. The Christian hope is absolutely certain. What is in doubt is whether we live out our lives in the reality of that coming. Do we have the faith to hope? Is that hope in Him purifying our lives?

In a Scottish fishing village many years ago a small boat came into the harbour. As each crew landed, their wives and girlfriends were there to greet them. All apart from one. As he arrived home his wife said, "I was waiting for you." "Yes", said the fisherman, "but you weren't watching for me." The man did not doubt his wife's faithfulness but he wanted to see her as his boat reached shore. We need to think that if it is so important to the Lord that we are going to be in heaven with Him, how important is it to Him that we live in expectancy of that day? That hope transformed the early Christian witness. Their watchword was Maranatha – the Lord is coming. Perhaps it is time for it to have such an effect on us!

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