



FOCUS VERSE

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

LESSON TEXT

Hebrews 11:1-6

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

2 For by it the elders obtained a good report.

3 Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

4 By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

5 By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

James 2:14-18

14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,

16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?

17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Faith in God will provide confidence for the present and hope for the future.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Trusting God No Matter What

From time to time an article appears in the news regarding a recent archeological discovery in the land of the Bible. Such discoveries are often framed by secular reporters to call into question the Bible's truthfulness. Unfortunately, Christians sometimes allow such things to shake their faith in God and His Word.

It is important to realize that our faith in God is not based on anything as flimsy as the latest archeological finding. The assured conclusions of science are always changing, and historians are constantly revising their understanding of the past. While observations of creation and historical research can offer helpful information, the results of such work

should always be viewed as incomplete. Human perception and logic is limited. Humans will never be able to place God under a microscope or put Him in a test tube.

True faith in God involves a choice to believe in Him no matter what. Our faith must arise out of a humble heart and be based on our personal relationship with God. God has set things up so that prideful people will always be able to find evidence that supports their choice to doubt God and His Word. At the same time, there is always a way to trust in God despite evidence that seems to contradict His Word. If the evidence for God were incontrovertible, faith would not be necessary. Let's choose to trust God!

OUTLINE

I. FAITH IS

- A. Substance of Things Hoped For
- B. Increased
- C. Expressed in Obedience

II. FAITH IS HONORED

- A. Faith Makes Our Offering Acceptable—Abel
- B. Faith Makes the Walk Possible—Enoch
- C. Faith Makes the Project Plausible—Noah
- D. Faith Makes the Call Feasible—Abraham

III. FAITH FOR TODAY

- A. Faith for Every Person
- B. Faith for the Present
- C. Faith for the Future

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There are several Hebrew and Greek terms that convey the ideas of faith, trust, or belief in our English Bibles. In various ways, all of these terms point to an important issue of the Christian life, namely, our need to place our

confidence in God. Trusting God is a key to our ultimate success as Christians. On one hand, it can be difficult to trust God. Often there is a tension between what we expect God to be or do for us, and the actual circumstances of our lives. When we go through hard times, it is challenging to remember that in spite of our present suffering, God remains good and trustworthy. On the other hand, it is a great comfort to know we can place our trust in God. We have assurance that He will supply all our needs, both material and spiritual (Philippians 4:19).

As Christians, we exercise our faith in a variety of ways. Paul often talked about our need for saving faith. We should believe that by enabling our obedient response to the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ gives us eternal salvation (Romans 3:22-24; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8). However, we also should keep in mind other passages of the New Testament that underscore the insufficiency of mere mental assent to Christian beliefs absent corresponding actions that demonstrate the sincerity of our trust in God. Our beliefs should always be backed up by our actions (James 1:25-27; 2:17-18).

Yet another important element of faith is our affirmation of the central Christian doctrines. For example, faith recognizes that Jesus is God manifest in flesh, that Scripture is inspired, and that Jesus will return in the future. Finally, faith is the confidence that God will act on our behalf. The Gospels often attribute healing and deliverance to the faith people placed in Jesus (Matthew 8:13; 9:29; 15:28; Mark 2:5; Luke 17:19). Christian faith is demonstrated by our response to the gospel, our lifestyle choices, our affirmation of important truths, and our confidence that God is able to work miraculously in our lives.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. FAITH IS

A. Substance of Things Hoped For

In our lesson text, the writer of Hebrews noted that faith is the “substance of things hoped for” (Hebrews 11:1). The writer’s chief intention here was to contrast Christians’ faith in Jesus Christ and His gospel with the limited experience of the Old Testament faithful. Their adherence to the law of Moses and its sacrificial system was merely a “shadow” when compared to the “substance” of Christ (Hebrews 10:1; 11:1).

While faithful Israelites exercised their faith in God in various ways and to varying degrees, they were unable to see clearly what Christians in the early church understood and experienced: that God’s entire salvation plan climaxed in the birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus’ work of salvation was the “promise” the Israelites looked toward in faith (Hebrews 11:13, 39). Indeed, in light of their remarkable commitment even apart from knowledge of Christ, the writer urged Christians to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and . . . run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1–2).

There is another application to be made here, however. Although Christians have knowledge of Christ not shared by Old Testament believers, their knowledge remains incomplete. Faith is still required to please God. Abel and Enoch placed their faith in

God, thus pleasing Him; Christians need that same kind of faith in order to please God (Hebrews 11:4–6).

There will always be points where our human knowledge is limited. We cannot see God or even prove His existence to the satisfaction of all skeptics. In spite of experiencing God’s presence and love, we will be tempted at times to doubt His goodness. We may even doubt His very existence. In such moments the heroes and heroines of faith in Hebrews 11 serve as examples for us today. They believed in God, and their faith was vindicated by the coming of Jesus the Messiah. We can be confident our faith in God will likewise be rewarded. Even when we cannot see God at work, He is with us. Even though we are sick or in pain, He is our healer. Faith looks beyond the present circumstances and chooses to trust God unconditionally.

B. Increased

In II Corinthians 4:13, Paul likened his own faith to that of the psalmist who declared that his confidence in Jehovah remained unshaken even in the midst of a major life crisis (Psalm 116:10). This comparison was appropriate for Paul, who maintained faith in Jesus Christ despite considerable hardship and suffering (II Corinthians 4:8–9). Later in the same letter, Paul expressed his hope that the Corinthian believers’ faith would increase (II Corinthians 10:15). In light of the entire letter, it seems Paul wanted them to increase in their ability to trust God regardless of their adverse circumstances.

Any suffering we go through because of our commitment to Christ is only temporary (II Corinthians 4:17). Paul’s point was that we should not let suffering or difficulties cause us to lose faith in God. By faith we continue to serve God despite our present trials, keeping in mind there is more to reality than what we can “see” (II Corinthians 5:7). Indeed, all of us should pray for God to increase such persistent and unwavering faith in our lives.

C. Expressed in Obedience

The Corinthians’ refusal to worship the idols of Corinth likely resulted in negative social pressure and even persecution. Some Christians, desiring to relieve such discomfort,

may have suggested that participation in idolatrous pagan rituals was not really a problem. Paul disagreed. He argued that true faith in God demanded obedience in spite of any difficulty it might cause. (See II Corinthians 6:14–7:1.) We can be tempted to relieve various pressures in our lives by backing off from complete obedience to God and His Word. However, such disobedience is never appropriate for the Christian. In Hebrews 11, obedience was integral to the faith of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others. Our faith in God will always result in obedience to God's commands.

At this point it is helpful to consider the second portion of the lesson text, in which James reminded his readers that faith is not complete without action. While mental assent is certainly an element of faith, the faith that pleases God will result in actions as well. James called Christians to account for showing partiality to rich visitors and despising the poor (James 2:1–9). He reminded them that their manner of speech and treatment of orphans and widows revealed the quality of their religion (James 1:27). If someone were lacking food or clothes, James explained, it would be useless to simply pronounce over that person, “be ye warmed and filled” without actually supplying his or her physical needs (James 2:15–16). These practical examples are used to illustrate the uselessness of faith not accompanied by action (James 2:14, 17–18). The quality of our faith in God will be determined by our obedience or lack of obedience to God's principles and commands.

II. FAITH IS HONORED

A. Faith Makes Our Offering Acceptable—Abel

Early in Genesis the story of Cain and Abel illustrated that God valued obedient faith. God accepted the offering presented by Abel, but he did not accept Cain's offering (Genesis 4:4–5). It seems clear that one offering is not necessarily as good as another in God's sight. While we may not be able to sort out all the reasons for God's rejection of Cain's offering, we know that God must have let Cain and Abel know what was expected of them. God does not leave humans in the dark as to His

wishes and then delight to punish them when they stumble in their ignorance. He always makes His expectations plain and administers judgment justly.

When Cain became angry after his offering was not accepted, God affirmed His impartiality in a rhetorical question: “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?” (Genesis 4:7). Also, Hebrews informs us that “by faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (Hebrews 11:4). If Cain and Abel had been unaware of God's expectations, Abel would have been guessing rather than bringing an acceptable offering by faith. What separated Cain and Abel was the fact that Abel trusted God to reward obedience to His commands and thus acted obediently. We may speculate that because Cain lacked confidence in God's words, he chose not to follow His instructions carefully.

Under the New Covenant, we do not replicate Abel's approach to God by means of animal sacrifices, but we do seek to imitate Abel's obedience and faith. In all ages some choose to take God's commands seriously and live in expectation of His righteous judgment. Others choose to live according to their own desires. Scripture assures us we will all answer to God for our words and actions (Matthew 12:36; Romans 2:5–10; 14:12). Whether we believe this or not will be made apparent by the way we choose to conduct our lives. If we truly have faith in God, we will order our lives after His Word and do our utmost to please Him. We can take comfort in knowing He is worthy of our trust. Obedience to God's Word will keep us secure in a troubled world. (See Psalm 119:160; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 7:24–25; James 1:25.)

B. Faith Makes the Walk Possible—Enoch

Following his presentation of Abel's faith, the writer of Hebrews turned to Enoch. The ambiguity surrounding Enoch in the Old Testament account is cleared up (Genesis 5:24). We are told in no uncertain terms that Enoch “was translated that he should not see death.” Also, Enoch is said to have “pleased God” (Hebrews 11:5). Immediately one notices a sharp contrast. While Abel died an unjust death despite his faith, Enoch's faith spared

him the experience of death. There is no explanation given for their differing experiences. Both men pleased God and possessed faith, yet the circumstances of their lives were very different.

This carries an important message for us today. We are called simply to place our faith in God. There is no guarantee God will take away our suffering or sickness. Despite genuine faith, we may experience injustice and mistreatment. Although some suffering is easy to explain, other suffering seems random and pointless. For example, if a drunk driver is killed in a car crash, it is easy to explain the misfortune as the consequence of poor choices. Harder to understand is the death of an innocent child in a tornado. The story of Cain and Abel reminds us that even though life is unfair, ultimately God will judge those who sin. The story of Enoch reminds us that God is able to conquer any enemy, even death. Whatever our situation or circumstance, by faith we affirm God is just. We can make it through any struggle or trial as long as we maintain our trust in God. By faith we can affirm that God is “a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

C. Faith Makes the Project Plausible—Noah

Noah’s story reminds us that our faithful actions can make a difference for others as well. Because of his faith in God, Noah “prepared an ark to the saving of his house” (Hebrews 11:7). His family is not credited with faith, but they were saved from the flood nonetheless. Of course it is reasonable to assume that Noah’s family members had a measure of faith since they agreed to enter the ark with Noah. This set them apart from the many who did not heed Noah’s warnings. Yet it was Noah who “found grace” (Genesis 6:8). It was his faith that made the difference in the preservation of the human race.

In our day, it is unlikely God will call us to attempt a project such as Noah’s. Yet every individual Christian is a part of the body of Christ on the earth—the church. Corporately the church is tasked with preaching the gospel to every human being. We are also commanded to disciple converts and teach the Word of God to them on an ongoing basis.

(See Matthew 28:19–20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; II Corinthians 5:18–20; II Timothy 4:2.) This is a mammoth task that can never be accomplished by human means alone.

The work of evangelization and discipleship must be empowered by the Holy Spirit. However, each of us has an opportunity to play a role in the work of the kingdom of God. As long as we place our confidence in our own ability, talent, skill, and knowledge, we will be ineffective. But if we place our trust in God, our efforts will yield spiritual fruit. Just as Noah’s faith brought salvation to his family, our faith will result in souls being added to the church.

D. Faith Makes the Call Feasible—Abraham

Abraham’s example shows us that true faith continues to trust God even when the future is uncertain. God promised Abraham a land and numerous descendants, yet Abraham did not know where this land of promise was located. In spite of uncertainty about how God would fulfill His promise, Abraham started out by faith (Hebrews 11:8). Before Isaac was born, Abraham and Sarah had grown old and seemed unable to have children. But God miraculously lived up to His promise. Often God calls us to accomplish things for which we are underprepared and ill-equipped. Yet faith will cause us to set out confidently, trusting that God will enable us to fulfill His calling.

A call from God does not automatically clear our paths of all obstacles. It will never be easy to plant a church in a new city or travel to another country as a missionary. It will be a struggle to start a new homeless ministry or to teach fifth-graders in Sunday school. In any effort to advance God’s kingdom, we will face opposition even though we are trying to obey God. Paul suffered intense persecution and countless setbacks, his divine commission notwithstanding. In spite of this, however, Paul successfully founded churches all around the Mediterranean and wrote a large portion of what we now know as the New Testament.

III. FAITH FOR TODAY

A. Faith for Every Person

Faith should certainly be a part of every Christian’s life. We cannot even approach

God, let alone please Him, without faith (Hebrews 11:6). If we do not believe in God's existence and His coming judgment, we will never respond to the gospel or order our lives according to His Word (Romans 10:17). Simply put, we will not be saved without faith in God. Either one has faith or one does not have faith. One cannot partially believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior. All Christians are called to believe for salvation in equal measure. (See Mark 16:16; Galatians 3:22; I Timothy 1:16.) It is our task as believers to preach the gospel to unbelievers so they can come to a place of faith in Christ (Romans 10:8–17).

There is another sense, however, in which God grants varying amounts of faith to individual Christians. Gifts of grace are given to particular members of the body of Christ for the purpose of edifying and serving others. (See Romans 12:4–8; I Corinthians 12.) In order to exercise these spiritual gifts, faith in God is required. "God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Romans 12:3). Paul indicated that some gifts require more faith than others. (See Romans 12:6.) We should pray that God would give us gifts with which we may serve the body of Christ, as well as the faith necessary to operate those gifts effectively. As Paul reminded us, all these gifts must be operated in a spirit of love (I Corinthians 13).

B. Faith for the Present

When we consider the exemplars of faith listed in Hebrews 11, it is evident they believed God was able to work in their daily lives. Abraham believed that even if Isaac were to die, God could raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). Moses' parents trusted that God could protect their newborn son from death despite Pharaoh's threats (Hebrews 11:23). Moses saw God defeat the Egyptian army in a miraculous display of power (Hebrews 11:29). Gideon, David, Samuel, and many others listed also saw God work in response to their faith.

Similarly, we should believe God to work in our lives today. Some might imagine that God sits in a distant Heaven, unconcerned with the details of our daily activities. But the Bible presents a different picture. From our birth to our death, God cares for us deeply (Psalm 23:6; 71:6; Romans 8:38–39). We are encouraged

to share our worries with Him (I Peter 5:7). Jesus truly understands our weaknesses and limitations, as He has shared in our humanity. In light of this, we are told to pray boldly for assistance when we are in need (Hebrews 4:15–16). Given His love and concern for us, we should place great faith in His ability and willingness to work on our behalf.



God's intimate concern for His children can be illustrated by a traumatic incident that occurred in the life of this writer's mother when she was only four years old. She had inquisitively attempted to peek inside a pot of boiling potato soup and accidentally tipped the pot over on herself. The scalding hot soup poured over her chin, shoulders, chest, and right hand resulting in severe burns. Her mother immediately rushed her to the bathtub and began running cold water over the burns.

She recalls feeling terrible pain as she desperately screamed, "Mama! Mama! Mama!" Between screams her mother, fully aware of her complete inability to relieve the pain, told the little girl, "Mama can't help you, but Jesus can." The next scream was different. "Jesus!" In response to this desperate cry, Jesus immediately took away all the pain. The child immediately became quiet, softly continuing to repeat the name of Jesus. By the time the local pastor arrived to pray, the girl was perfectly calm. Although it took several months for the burns to heal, the girl never went to a doctor, and she felt no more pain related to the burns.

What a privilege it is to place our faith in Jesus and experience His gracious involvement in our lives! There are innumerable blessings we enjoy as faithful children of the King. People living in Canada and the United States are confident that if they find themselves in danger, they can simply dial 911, and within a few minutes a police officer will arrive to offer protection and assistance. But how much greater it is for the child of God who has access to the Creator of the world! We can call on Him any

time of the day or night, and He will supply all our needs (Philippians 4:19).

Of course, the greatest human need is to be saved from sin. God has already done His part to provide for this need. Jesus purchased our salvation through His atoning death and resurrection (Romans 4:25). Now He invites us to place our faith in Him and demonstrate that faith through our obedient response to the gospel. (See Acts 2:37–38; Romans 1:16; Ephesians 3:6; II Thessalonians 1:8.) Subsequent to initial conversion, genuine faith will lead us to conform our lives as closely as possible to the teaching of God’s Word. (See Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; I Thessalonians 2:12.) By faith we will overcome if we continue to trust in Him (I John 5:4).

Another benefit we have in Christ is divine healing. Jesus’ atoning sacrifice also provides for the healing of our physical bodies. (See Isaiah 53:5; I Peter 2:24.) For reasons that are not always apparent, God does not always heal when we ask Him. (See II Timothy 4:20.) Christians of great faith sometimes die of cancer. Except for those who are alive at the Second Coming, all humans will face death eventually (I Thessalonians 4:15–17). Nevertheless, we should certainly pray and believe for healing when we are suffering. Miracles of healing should be a normal part of the Christian life (Acts 3:6–8; 5:16; 8:7; 14:9–10; 28:8–9; James 5:14–15). Even if we do not receive healing in this life, we can be confident that in Heaven there will be no more pain (Revelation 21:4).

C. Faith for the Future

The heroes and heroines of faith trusted that God would act in the future on behalf

of His chosen people (Hebrews 11:10, 16). When the promised Messiah came into the world, it became apparent that their faith in God’s salvation was justified. Today, we also wait for God to act in the future. Although we do not know the exact time of Jesus’ return, we know He is sure to come for us (Titus 2:13). In faith we look forward to the day when we will be with Him forever (I Thessalonians 4:16–17).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

As we navigate the world of the twenty-first century, we can learn from the biblical stories of many faithful men and women. In spite of many struggles and hardships and seasons of confusion and doubt, they maintained their faith in God. We read about their stories today and celebrate the roles they played in God’s grand plan for humanity, but it is helpful to remember they were largely unaware of that plan. They simply believed God’s promises and obeyed His voice, not knowing exactly how things would turn out.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see and understand much more of God’s plan today. However, we will be unable to see the true significance of the part we play until we get to Heaven. This is why faith is so vital. We must remain committed to trust in God no matter what we are experiencing or how far away He seems. If our faith remains strong, we—like those who have gone before—will obtain promises. (See Hebrews 11:33.) More importantly, someday we will hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). ■

REFLECTIONS

- What are some scriptural benefits of faith?
- Why do people of faith continue to experience suffering?
- What is the connection between our faith and our actions?
- How can we maintain our faith in God even in trying circumstances?