

way, he shall deliver the Hebrew nation from the distress they are under from the Egyptians” (*Antiquities* ii, 9,3). That isn’t, of course, the Biblical record. Hebrews simply affirms that the action of Amram and Jochebed were motivated by faith in God’s promise.

Once again, we may be inclined to see Moses’ killing of the Egyptian slave master and his subsequent escape into Midian (Ex. 2.11-15) as something other than “faith”. After all, while he “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God” (Heb. 11.25), he was acting impetuously and fled in fear. Yet it became part of God’s work in growing his faith. When he returned he didn’t “fear the king’s anger, and persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (v. 27). The Passover itself was an act of faith in what God was about to do (v. 28). So too was the crossing of the Red Sea (v. 29). The same principle of faith motivated Joshua and Rahab in the fall of Jericho (vv. 30-31).

- Reflect on the Passover (Ex. 12.21-30) and the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14). When have we needed to act with that degree of faith?

And...

Read: Hebrews 11.32-40.

And so the list goes on – people, many of them unnamed, who have lived and died trusting in God and his promise, not seeing the fulfilment. We live in the same line of faith, but in the days of fulfilment.

For these Jewish Christians the message is clear – “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (10.39).

- “We live in the same line of faith” as Abraham, Joseph, Moses..., “but in the days of fulfilment.” Is that how we have understood the Old Testament – and our faith? How does this affect our view of their lives BC and our lives AD?
- In what ways are we challenged by the “heroes of the faith” we read about in Hebrews 11?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

8. Living by Faith

Reading: Hebrews 11

The Queen said, “Now I’ll give you something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.”

“I can’t believe that!” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast ...”

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*)

Faith isn’t irrational, but does take us beyond reason and experience. Sometimes people have called faith “a leap in the dark.” This isn’t a helpful description – too much like “drawing a long breath and shutting your eyes”!

Christian faith involves us with the unseen God who has been revealing himself throughout history and especially in the coming and life’s work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Faith leads us beyond reason and experience, and, as we live by faith, we find it demonstrated to be both true and reasonable.

Hebrews 10 ends with the quote from Habakkuk and a comment on it – “But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (vv. 38-39).

Read: Hebrews 11.1-3.

The faith we are talking about is “being sure of what we hope for” – “substance” (KJV or ‘ground” or “confidence”, fn), “assurance” (RSV).

Faith is always directed towards “what we hope for.” People without any form of “faith” are also without “hope.” Folk “hope” (wish) for all sorts of things, but can never depend on them happening. Faith has assurance which becomes the basis for life.

And there is always the element of the “unseen” about the object of faith. Sometimes we have things that are visible and provable rationally, yet

nevertheless call for “faith.” In spite of all the careful calculations that went into the first lunar landing in July 1969, there still had to be faith to do it. So faith is “being certain”– “evidence” (KJV), “conviction” (RSV), or “proof”– conviction as well as assurance.

Faith is also the way we look at the universe as the creation of God – “so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”

“Greek speculation about the formation of the ordered world out of formless matter had influenced Jewish thinkers like Philo and the author of the Book of Wisdom; the writer to the Hebrews is more biblical in his reasoning and affirms the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, a doctrine uncongenial to Greek thought. The faith by which he accepts it is faith in the divine revelation; the first chapter of Genesis is probably uppermost in his mind, since he is about to trace seven living examples of faith from the subsequent chapters of that book” (FF Bruce).

- Reflect on Christian history since New Testament times. Name some of the conspicuous examples of persons who have lived by faith. Why do we see them as significant “heroes of the faith”?

Before the Great Flood

Read: Hebrews 11.4-7.

In the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4.3-7), the issue wasn’t that Cain brought a grain offering, while Abel sacrificed an animal (as some have suggested). The Lord’s words to Cain in verses 6-7 make it clear that “sacrifice is acceptable to God not for its material content, but in so far as it is the outward expression of a devoted and obedient heart” (FF Bruce).

The record simply says about Enoch, “When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen. 5.21-24).

God is looking for people who “walk humbly with him” (Mic. 6.8). “And 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 earnestly seek him” (v. 6).

We know more about Noah than we do about either Abel or Enoch. At a time when evil abounded in society, Noah “found favour in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6.8). He is described as “a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (v. 9). His building of the ark “in holy fear” was faith in action (Heb. 11.7).

- In the true “olden days” (before the Great Flood) what was the “evidence” on which Abel, Enoch and Noah based their faith? How did their faith translate into action?

The Patriarchs

Read: Hebrews 11.8-22.

At the age of 75, Abraham heard God’s call – “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12.1-3).

Abraham “obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Heb. 11.8). And when he arrived, he lived “like a stranger in a foreign country” (v. 9), but knew that even the land of Canaan wasn’t his final destination – “for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (v. 10).

“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age [100!] – and Sarah herself was barren [and 90!] – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise” (v. 11 – see Gen. 21.1-6). Fourteen years before, Abraham had a son, Ishmael, by Hagar (16.15-16) – impatient with God? Yet he is remembered, not for his fumbings and stumbings, but for his faith.

Verses 13 to 16 expand verse 10. The goal of these faithful people wasn’t an earthly promised land, but a heavenly one. It was this faith in God’s promises right into the unseen future that motivated Isaac and Jacob and Joseph (vv. 20-22).

- The Bible faithfully records the “fumbings and stumbings” of so many of the Lord’s people. Yet they are celebrated as people who lived “by faith.” Why is that so? What does this say to us about the life of faith?

Moses

Read: Hebrews 11.23-29.

Moses has already been mentioned as being “faithful as a servant in all God’s house” (3.2,5).

According to Josephus, the Lord appeared in a dream to Amram, Moses’ father, and told him, “Know therefore that I shall provide for you all in common what is for your good, and particularly for thyself what shall make thee famous; for that child, out of dread of whose nativity the Egyptians have doomed the Israelite children to destruction, shall be this child of thine, and shall be concealed from those who watch to destroy him: and when he is brought up in a surprising