



Living a Life of Faith

An ABF Series on Hebrews 11

Lesson 2 - A Life of Faith is a Life that Pleases God

How would you respond to the statement “There is nothing you can do or need to do to please God”?

I [Ben] heard a sermon once where a very prominent speaker made the claim that there is nothing you or I can do to please God. That sounded good. It sounded grace-filled. I say this with love for the man, but he was wrong. Scripture is very clear that we can live in a way that pleases God and we can live in a way that displeases God (Romans 12:1-2, Romans 14:18, 2 Corinthians 5:9, Ephesians 5:10, Philippians 4:18, Colossians 3:18, Hebrews 13:20-21).

Now, I know what the speaker was probably thinking by this, and he was close. The Bible is clear that you can't appease God's wrath (Romans 3:24-25; 1 John 2:2) and you can't earn grace (Romans 8:31-32). But once we are in a relationship with God, it is entirely possible to both please and displease our father, just as in any healthy relationship between parent and child there will be unconditional love, while there is still a possibility of a heartbroken parent or a proud parent.

Hebrews 11 is a chapter that is all about how to please God. This is where the author starts, and this is in many ways what the whole chapter is about, because that should be what our lives

are all about. There is no higher purpose for the creature than to please God by bringing him glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Why do so many true Christians spend so little time thinking about how to please God? What is the difference between thinking about how to please God and how to appease him or seek to earn his grace?

The Prologue of Hebrews 11 (vv. 1-3)

If I asked what the subject of Hebrews 11, most people would respond faith. But what exactly does the passage say about faith? Why does the author talk about it for so long? To fully understand Hebrews 11, it is important to understand what the author has just said.

Hold on! (10:19-25) The author commands his audience to hold fast to what they have been given.

Or else! (10:26-31) The author warns what will happen if his listeners do not heed his command.

You can do it! (10:32-39) The author both reminds them of past victory and supports his argument with Scripture. It is this final quotation of Scripture that leads us into Hebrews 11.

“We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” Leads us to example after example of those who have faith and preserved their souls in doing so.

- **The prologue describes the nature of faith (v. 1)**

Faith gives substance to what God has promised and works as evidence to prove the reality of what we can't see. God's promises are by definition future. Faith is what allows us to

look at things in the future and treat them as present realities. This is different from saying that it is irrational or foolish. Although faith often goes against the culture and at times may seem to be hoping for the impossible, the author of Hebrews shows throughout this chapter that those who believed had good reason for showing the faith they did.

Is biblical faith a “leap in the dark?” (i.e. does it mean believing with no evidence or in spite of the evidence?)

How can faith be both counter-cultural and unintuitive yet be rational?

- **The prologue shows the importance of faith (v. 2)**

Who are the people of old?

The KJV and other translations use the phrase “the elders.” Some use the phrase “the ancients.” This is referring to the list of following names in this chapter. Abel, Enoch, Noah, and the rest are all the ancient ones that received their commendation.

Building on the Scripture quotation in 10:37-38, the author demonstrates that it is by faith that one can please God and receive His commendation. He gives illustration after illustration of this by showing us how the lives of those in Old Testament received praise from God

How often does the word “commended”¹ show up in the first six verses of Hebrews 11?

¹ The ESV does a great job here showing how the same Greek word (*martureo*) shows up again and again throughout the passage. Other translations use different wording when translating which fails to highlight the theme that is being developed.

What does it mean that they were commended?

The word for “commended” shows up once more in verse 39 and the word “witnesses” in 12:1 “witnesses” comes from the same word and could be translated “commended ones.” The Greek word is *martureo* from which we get our word “martyr.” A martyr was a witness, one who witnessed to the truth of God and came to mean they did so at the cost of their life. Here it means that God is witnessing to the fact that people have lived a life that pleases him by showing faith, and that he does so in Scripture. Although we won’t be inscripturated for our faith, we do have the ability to live a life that pleases God so that He will one day commend or praise our faith as well.

- **The prologue transitions to the examples of faith (v. 3)**

Commentators are divided about whether this verse goes with the introduction (vv. 1-2) or with the rest of the chapter (vv. 3-38). The reference to “things which are seen” echoes verse 1 and this verse is about the listeners, not the hall of faith.

But the beginning of this verse sounds like the rest of the chapter, and so it is probably best to see this verse as marking a transition. The author is connecting with his audience by showing that they already have some faith, but will they now show the faith that the elders have? You and I must ask ourselves the same question: we believe God created the world, will we live by faith even when trials and difficulties come?

Abel (v. 4)

Is it possible to offer worship that God rejects? Why do many people not like the answer to this question?

The first example of faith the author gives us is Abel. The story is an old but familiar one: Abel offers a sacrifice and his brother Cain offers a sacrifice (Genesis 4:1-8). God is pleased with Abel, but not with Cain, so Cain kills his brother. While the story in Genesis focuses on Cain, the author of Hebrews focuses on Abel and his faith and faithfulness to God.

Why did God approve of Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's?

This question is a topic of big debate among those who study God's Word. Three primary suggestions have been made.

1. God had respect to Abel's offering because it was a blood sacrifice, whereas Cain's was produce.
 - We do know that God gave revelation earlier than we have record of (ex. Job knew about a resurrection). It is possible that God had revealed to Cain and Abel that he wanted an animal sacrifice, but Cain brought a sacrifice of his crops anyway.
 - The problems with this view are 1) it requires making assumptions about what God had said and 2) God does accept sacrifices of crops in the law of the Old Testament.
2. God had respect to Abel's offering because he brought the best, whereas Cain simply brought whatever.
 - Genesis specifically notes that Able brought a first-born lamb and its fat (the best part of an animal), but it simply says that Cain brought an offering.
 - Again, this is possible, but it an argument from silence.
3. God had respect to Abel's offering because it was made in faith, whereas Cain's was done in unbelief.

- This option may include one or both of the above, but it focuses on the real issue at hand – the heart of the brothers.
- Even if there was a more specific reason why God rejected Cain’s offering, in the story it’s pretty clear that Cain knew what he had done wrong and refused to humble himself.

Some think that Abel’s continual speaking is the crying out of his blood for vengeance against his brother Cain, but this is unlikely. This phrase simply means that Abel’s testimony stands today as an example of faith for us. The life of Abel teaches us that God accepts the worship and service of those believe in him, but that he rejects the worship of those who try to live for him but do so in a state of unbelief.

How can we be sure that our worship to God is accepted by him? What kinds of things will lead to Cain-like worship God rejects, and what kinds of things will lead to Abel-like worship that God accepts and praises?

Enoch (v. 5)

Enoch is another mysterious figure in Scripture (Genesis 5:21-24). His entire life is summed up in 4 verses, yet he became hugely important in Jewish tradition and is referenced here as being a man of faith. Enoch lived only 365 years, compared to the then norm of 950+. And he never died. Enoch was “translated” so that he would not face death. This is a fascinating story, yet one that we have almost no information about!

The main point of this story is to show that Enoch was rewarded because he pleased God, and that needs to be our focus on this passage as well. This section ties together two key concepts

together that we have seen in this lesson so far: **pleasing** God and being **commended** by God. The author shows how these two are a cause and effect, when God commends one of His servants, He does so because they please Him.

What do Enoch and Abel have in common? Why do you think these two examples are used first, other than the fact that they were first chronologically?

Us (v. 6)

At the end of this introductory section, the author stops to apply what he has been teaching on. He reviews what he has said thus far:

Faith is necessary to live a life that pleases God so that we can be commended by God.

Jonathan Edwards begins one of his most famous books, *The Treatise on Religious Affections* by saying “There is no question of greater importance to every individual of mankind than this: What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards?” In other words, the most important question we can ask is how can we please God?

This verse begins by talking about those who draw near to God. How did Abel draw near to God? How did Enoch draw near to God? How can we draw near to God in those ways?

The author says that faith is necessary to please God. What two things in particular does the author teach are necessary to live a life that pleases God?

Remember, the audience of this letter was primarily Jewish. They believed that God existed. In fact, the author has already said his audience believes the universe was created by the word

of God! His focus then, would be more on the second one. People who believe God exists must also believe that God will reward them when they seek him. Writing to a discouraged, down and out, persecuted church the concern was that people who believed God existed might just quit trying to pursue him through Christ and return to an outdated, now dead series of rituals. Instead, these believers needed to believe that God would respond if (and only if) they continued on in faith in Jesus.

We too can believe God exists and yet think the life he has called us to is too hard. We can also slip back into an apathetic, lethargic lifestyle that does live as God has called us but nevertheless thinks everything is fine between us and him. We need the call to faith as well, to believe both in God's existence and in his character. To see him as our Creator and our Father. To believe in both his power and his goodness.

Why is it at times harder to believe that God is good to us than it is to believe that he created the world?

How can we seek God and draw near to him?