

The benefits of faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 May 2015

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Yes, I almost feel we could skip the sermon because it's all in that hymn, but perhaps we won't! So if you'd like to open your Bibles at Hebrews chapter 11.

! And as I've already said, in the last part of the letter the writer turns from describing the better things that are found in Christ, and instead turns to examining what it all means for his disciples. And he starts these last chapters by talking about faith. And so we have this well-known verse, Hebrews 11 verse 1. Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Now sometimes this is taken as a definition of faith, but to me it's not so much a definition as a description of how faith works.

The epistle to the Hebrews is all about holding on, persevering. And in the writer's mind the key to that is faith. And then the writer goes on to expand the practice of faith by means of these historical examples.

[1 : 17] And the examples are arranged more or less chronologically, but it doesn't mean that this is simply a list. In fact as we go through we'll see that the examples are chosen to illustrate how the whole life and progress of the people of God revolve around faith.

And so as he says in verse 2, this is what the ancients were commended for. And I'd like to structure our study this way.

Take those two phrases that we get in verse 1. Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. And initially look at those two themes as they appear in this chapter.

I've said that seeing the invisible is perhaps the minor theme, and I'm only going to say a few words about this. We'll do that very briefly. Look a bit more about being sure of what we hope for and the idea of promise, which is very much a major theme of this passage.

And then thirdly, we will look through briefly, but without looking at each one in great detail, but we will look through the examples of the heroes of faith and find out what they learned and by seeing what they learned, what the writer has to tell his original readers and what he has to tell us today.

[2 : 44] So we'll do it in those three sections. So we'll start by looking briefly at this idea that faith sees what is invisible.

There are two references to seeing what's invisible in verse 3 and in verse 27. Actually, there are two different Greek words used there if you look at what the words are.

The first reference there really means something bright rather than something visible. There's also a hint of seeing what is invisible in the next chapter, in chapter 12, verse 1, that we read, where we read of that cloud of witnesses who are there but not seen.

And so the writer wants us to remind us that faith can see the invisible. He reminds us even from creation that what was made was made from what was not visible.

It almost seems to say that, that in a sense the universe wasn't made out of nothing but what's physical, what's now visible, was made presumably in some sense out of some spiritual material, was made that we see by faith that the origins of the universe are invisible, if we want to put it in those terms.

[4 : 06] And he tells us that to remind us that faith looks beyond what we can immediately see. It doesn't ignore what we can immediately see, quite the contrary, but it looks at what we immediately see by seeing what is beyond it and what is behind it and therefore through that, seeing the reality behind it and so interpreting what we see in terms of what we don't see.

And as we see in verse 27, he reminds us that this was the key to Moses' perseverance. He saw what was invisible and therefore regarded that of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

So let's say just look at that briefly. We'll look at a little bit more about this second theme of being certain of what we hope for as I think that relates to this idea of seeking the promise.

After all, what is promised is what we're hoping for. So I think it's in his thinking in terms of seeking the promise. So what do we hope for? The promise.

The word in various, the word promise or promises or promised, different forms, but of the same word in English and in Greek, occurs no less than seven times in this chapter.

[5 : 33] Just look through if you like. It occurs twice in verse nine. It occurs in verse 11. It occurs in verse 13. It occurs in verse 17.

And then there's a bit of a gap. And then in verse 33 and in verse 39. And these are all forms of the basic Greek word, epangelia.

I've stuck to the strong spelling there, the strong spelling there, which doesn't put the N in, but it's that double G is pronounced as an ung. So it's epangelia.

It's the same word all the way through, except in some cases it's a verb rather than a noun, but basically the same word all the way through. The quotations from Genesis, where it's a quotation from Genesis, it actually translates two related Hebrew words, one of which is dabar, which I'm saying, I'm no linguist in Greek or Hebrew, but I'm relying very much on Strong here.

But it says that, Strong says that dabar means to pronounce or to announce something, particularly to announce it in advance. And shabar, which has more the meaning of actually swearing an oath.

[6 : 54] And I think it's worth looking at the Greek word, epangelia, because promise in English kind of puts the emphasis on the act of doing it. We think of a promise as being something that's kind of slightly more certain than maybe just something you might say off the top of your head, as we say.

If you promise something, there's a kind of emphasis on the act of doing this speaking, of promising it. And I think that is there in the Greek, but the Greek, I think, puts more emphasis on the thing announced.

It's made of, as you can see there, two syllables, obviously, or two parts, ep and angelia. Angelia is the word from which you get words like angel, and it means a message or an announcement.

And the ep bit suggests that this is the message that's announced in advance. So while the promise does, of course, also refer to the faithfulness of the God who promised it, there is perhaps a bit more there in terms of the actual announcement, the actual news that's being announced.

And, of course, what is the news that's being announced? The ep and angelia. Well, of course, when it comes to fruition, ultimately, and again, we get this hinted at towards the end of the chapter, it is the you or the evangelion, which is the gospel, the good news, the you prefix there, meaning something that sounds good, like we get eulogy and euphonious in English.

[8 : 35] It means the good-sounding news, the good news. So what is promised is ultimately the good news, although it's a bit more complicated there, as we'll see as we go through.

But ultimately, the promise is the good news. Now, I say, it may be more complicated than that, because there are earlier forms of the promise, of course, such as that to Abraham.

And the promise to Abraham was that in him all nations will be blessed, or there was the promise of the Exodus, that the people would be led out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey.

But the writer wants to point us to the fact that in the end, the true promise is the one that's found in verse 40, the good news that is in Jesus Christ.

Those other promises were only foreshadows, really, of the gospel that is found in Jesus Christ.

And in a sense, they are the gospel in different words, that through the seed of Abraham, all nations will be blessed, and that the people of God will be led into a land of their own, out of slavery.

[9 : 54] But still, we can't see the future. At least I can't. I assume that nobody here is very good at seeing into the future. And so, aware of this, the writer thinks, well, how am I going to tell them how to look into the future?

Well, the only way to see the end from the beginning, in a sense, is to look back into history, to look back and see how the heroes of faith in the past actually looked for the city whose builder and architect is God, and how, to some extent, they did receive those promises because if we didn't see that to some extent, of course, the lesson would be rather empty.

And so, we saw, in some extent, they did receive those promises, how Abraham did indeed receive Isaac figuratively back from the dead. Moses did indeed lead the people to the promised land.

But did the Old Testament believers really inherit what was promised? Well, the writer, if you look through, he answers this with an unequivocal yes and no. Yes, in verses 17 to 19, Abraham received Isaac back from the dead.

In verse 30 and 33, we read of those who did indeed receive, they subdued kingdoms and so on and obtained the promises. Moses did, of course, lead the people to the promised land.

[11:28] But at the same time, the writer tells us that in a sense, they didn't inherit what was promised. They're still seeking a city whose builder and architect is God.

And so, we see that in verse 10 and verse 13 and in verses 39 and 40 when he says that, in fact, they're still waiting, that David's Jerusalem was not the true city of God although it prefigured it. Isaac was not the true child of promise although we learn something about the child of promise in the way he escaped from the grave but he wasn't the true child of promise.

And Moses, as we've already seen in earlier chapters, is not the true pioneer although he did lead the people across the desert. But Moses, we're told, endured disgrace for the sake of Christ in verse 26.

It's quite a remarkable claim really because in a sense he can't really have had a clear view of who Christ was but he knew that there was another prophet to come, a prophet who would speak all the words of God and would be the one that they must listen to, the people must listen to.

[12:47] So, the writer sort of boils that down to saying that he endured persecution for the sake of Christ. So, as we read through this and look at these historical examples, we see that they were seeing behind what was immediate, they saw what was invisible and they were seeking the promise and to some extent they did receive what was promised but in the ultimate sense they did not and that's what the writer really wants us to point to, that they are still waiting in one sense for that city.

So, let's look at some of these illustrations from history then. As I say, it's roughly chronological, well, it is more or less chronological but I don't think it's simply a sort of list.

I think the people did actually learn, there are slightly different lessons in each grouping that we get here and I'll try and pick out what those lessons are. So, we start with the ancients, I think he's talking about those glimpses into prehistory that we get from Genesis 1 to 11.

We don't get any sort of detailed history of those times which I suppose were before the invention of writing but we do get the things that God really thinks we need to know about those times and so we get these glimpses of those that the writer here calls the ancients from Abel to Noah are the ones he mentions and what was it that these people learned in their journey of faith?

Well, first of all that that faith is what God commends. He says that three times in verse 2, verse 4 and verse 5 and he says they learnt that God exists first of all and that he rewards those who seek him through faith.

[14:54] This is 2 and verse 6 and then perhaps what is the most important lesson of all and what points forward as it were we were told in verse 7 that Noah discovered that faith actually is the key to righteousness you can't have righteousness you can't be holy unless you have faith so that's what the ancients learned and moving on we come to the patriarchs a term that we use for the founders of the Jewish nation from Abraham I suppose down to the sons of Jacob we think of as the patriarchs what is it that they learned well particularly what they learned is that faith is about looking forward they looked forward to a land and a nation of promise and so we start with

Abraham who moved he could have stayed where he was comfortable city of Ur of the Chaldees that city where they invented things like accountants and the like if you look at some of the history of Ur it was a very early civilization one way and another and he could have stayed there in that comfortable country but he was looking for something else God told him that that wasn't his country nothing wrong with it as countries go but it wasn't his country it wasn't the city that was built by God and so he moved although he didn't know where he was going and where sometimes what God seemed even seemed to be contradictory he was told that Isaac was the child of promise and through him all nations be blessed and then he was told to go and sacrifice him sometimes what God said almost seemed to be contradictory but he was still looking forward and he reasoned that if necessary

God could raise Isaac from the dead and although it didn't happen physically in that case that figuratively he did indeed as it says receive Isaac back from the dead he was looking forward that that promise will be fulfilled and if you just read through this section you find all these future oriented words let me just point out a few of them for you so we read about heirs in verse 9 heirs are people are waiting to inherit something we read the words looking forward explicitly in verse 10 verse 12 we're talking about descendants not how I live now but I'm thinking about my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren my descendants we talk about seeing from a distance in verse 13 13 and although this is obviously a seeing metaphor

I think he's actually saying here about looking forward in time in this verse seeing what was ahead not so much what was ahead in front of them on the journey but what was ahead of them in time in verse 16 we read about longing they were longing for something you don't long for what you've got now you long for something that's your next holiday or your grandchildren to be born or something like that you long for something that you've not yet got and explicitly in verse 20 we read about the future they were thinking not about the present but about the future and in verse 22 we meet specifically we meet Joseph and Joseph knew that although he died in Egypt and as a great leader in Egypt he probably could have had a pyramid built or a great tomb of some sort built for him but he didn't do that because he knew that

Egypt was not the land of promise and he wanted his bones taken back he knew that eventually the people of God would move back to Canaan and he wanted them to take his bones with them so instead of having them as everybody is well aware of course the ancient Egyptians were very keen on great tombs and monuments and he could have had one in Egypt but no he wanted one in the promised land instead I don't swear he got a pyramid there but what he wanted to be buried near where the promise of God was going to be fulfilled and perhaps he was hoping they put up a blue plaque and it would say near this spot lie buried the bones of Joseph prime minister of Egypt he saved our fathers from dying in the great famine he wanted to be remembered as it were not by the people in Egypt but by the people of God and through that Joseph would be honoured himself he'd get a plaque or a tomb or something among the people of God but even more

[20:17] God would be honoured as the one who took Joseph to Egypt and then brought him back even if only after he was dead and these people were looking forward to God fulfilling his promises and look at verse 16 what were they looking for they were looking for still in the future a heavenly city and the passage writer tells us that what they were actually looking for was not David's Jerusalem was not a city in Egypt or in Ur or Babylon or in even in Mount Zion the physical Mount Zion Jerusalem what they were really looking for was a heavenly city the city that's built by God himself so in a sense in fact although they're all dead millennia ago in a sense they're still waiting they're still there waiting for the final

Jerusalem to be built for that final city whose builder and architect is God to be completed so the patriarchs although they knew about the exodus in a sense are still waiting and of course what was God's great act of redemption in the Old Testament it was of course the exodus itself and so not surprisingly this gets the biggest chunk of the of Hebrews 11 from 23 verse through to verse 31 and what did the people of God learn at the exodus well first of all look at verse 23 and verse 27 the Moses parents didn't fear the king's edict Moses himself would rather be numbered with the people of God but in verse 24 of course he could have made the other decision he could have ignored the people of God and said no I'm fine that's their problem

I'm gonna maybe I'll become a great official in Egypt if my brother dies I might even inherit the throne and if that happens then well perhaps then I could do something for my people the Hebrew people but you know basically my future lies in Egypt he could have said that but he didn't he reject faith rejects both the threats and the seductions of the ungodly world represented here by Egypt represented in New Testament times by Rome represented by Babylon of course in Revelation and the seductions of this world he could have turned away when he saw the Israelites suffering and say well maybe I can do something for them later once my own position is established but he didn't do that he identified with them rather than his adopted mother and brother but something even more important that the people learned at the

Exodus they learned that in fact faith is what distinguishes and defines the people of God it's not really their ancestry it's faith that does it and the writer is very keen to make this point and he makes it in various ways but let's look particularly at verse 28 what was it that defined the people of God in when they were still in Egypt on that last night as it were when they were standing there with their coats on ready to go what was it would define the people of God it was faith by faith they put the blood on the on the lintel of the door and so the destroyer passed over that house and so it was faith that defined who was an Israelite and who was an Egyptian who would stay and suffer the depredations of the destroyer and who would go to the promised land verse 29 and 30 faith enabled the

Israelites to cross the Red Sea the Egyptians tried it but because they didn't have faith they couldn't do it it was faith that saved the Israelites and destroyed the Egyptians who were foolhardy and drowned and then faith destroyed Jericho people of God trusted in God that he would bring down

the walls of that impregnable city and indeed he did whatever the physics of it were whether it was caused by them marching around and undermining it somehow or whether it was a direct act of God is not perhaps clear but either way it was faith that destroyed the walls of Jericho but what are we told quite specifically we're told about Rahab aren't we Rahab isn't that an important character in the Old Testament but why does she specifically get a mention in this very brief list of the heroes of faith well of course because she was actually a citizen of Jericho she lived in Jericho and she wasn't a very respectable person either people argue about whether this prostitute is the exact translation or not but she seems to have lived by not perhaps the most respectable of professions let's at least go that far but what was it saved her what was it meant that eventually she was counted not with the citizens of the land but with the citizens of

[26 : 24] God with the people of God it was that she had faith that's what we're told that was what made her transferred her as it were from being a citizen of Canaan to being one of the people of God was her faith faith in action when she realized that God was with the spies who sought succor in her house rather than with the citizens of the city where she was living so the main thing that the people of God were supposed to learn at the exodus although they didn't all do it was that actually being numbered with the people of God is a matter of faith faith is what distinguishes and defines the people of God in the Passover and the crossing the Red Sea and in Rahab herself so what happened next

I think at this point the writer begins to realize is that perhaps he's bitten off a bit more than he can chew and that parchment is expensive and he's got to get this letter in the post ready to go but he hasn't finished he has one more important lesson to teach so well what happened next well that's all Samson and David and all those guys and those prophets and people like that not many of them even get mentioned by name but he says a lot about them nonetheless what do we think about David for a minute David conquered a kingdom verse 33 but also the people of God hid in holes in the ground and while it doesn't explicitly say who in verse 38 you think back

David did that as well there were times when David hid in a hole in the ground there were times when he was in great danger and there were times when he was triumphant verse 33 some gained as we said at least in a limited sense what was promised but in verse 39 in the absolute sense they didn't gain what was promised they're still waiting verse 35 is rather interesting isn't it as a kind of play on words here it's not really a play on words just a play on ideas he says well yeah you could look and there were some women who received their dead back their children who were dead they received them back from the dead they needed their son was needed to keep their farm alive and they through faith they got their child who was apparently dead of a fever or an accident or something was restored to life and you might think that was the most important thing you could get that was the great triumph of faith but he says well actually of course there were others who didn't and there were others who even for themselves chose not to you know not to be released from prison who chose not to be to escape torture and suffering and why did they do that because they weren't looking for just an immediate being restored back to life they were looking for a better resurrection that's what it tells us in verse 35 that's kind of pivotal isn't it they were seeking a better resurrection better even than those ladies who received their sons and children back to life they were seeking some people were seeking a better resurrection than that and of course that's paralleled isn't it in the in the new testament of the widow who got her son restored and Lazarus who was the man of the family and was restored to health so that he could continue to be in that role but that wasn't the true resurrection the better resurrection is the one that's found in Jesus Christ because after all all those people died again eventually normally as I said you could last week can only die once but in that sense a few people did die more than once but in the end they were seeking like everybody else if they had faith that better resurrection that is found in Jesus Christ so some were triumphant in battle others suffered humiliation and imprisonment in death but whatever path they walked along they walked through faith wherever God led them they followed by faith and they understood that they needed faith both for success and failure apparent failure at least both for victory and defeat both for triumph and humiliation resurrection both for suffering and for resurrection they understood that the triumphs were not decisive were not final that those came back from the dead that resurrection was not final and they also understood by faith that their setbacks and disasters were not final either they were only temporary and could be endured because they because they were seeking a better kingdom so what did these people learn they learnt that faith is needed equally for success and for apparent failure for victory and for defeat

for triumph and for humiliation for suffering and for resurrection that faith is required in all of those so wherever

God leads us up or down in trouble or enjoy as the hymn says and the title of the book says that faith we walk either way by faith faith is what takes us through both those experiences as a reminder of that poem of Kipling I couldn't remember the exact words and I didn't look it up but it says something if you can meet with fame and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same something like that then you'll be a man my son well I think that's what is being said here but not just being a man but being a man or woman of faith if you can treat both those things through faith so to sum up the writer has finished his object lesson in faith what is it that we've learnt faith is what is commended by God and it is the key to righteousness you can't have righteousness you can't have holiness without faith faith is always looking forward it's always being certain of what we hope for it's always seeing what is not visible faithful faith is not only the key to righteousness but it's the distinguishing feature of the people of

[34 : 14] God it's the boundary marker if you like it says who's in and who's out those who are in the people of God are precisely and exactly the people who have true and genuine faith that's not to say that it may not be immediately clear from the outside which is whether that faith is genuine or not but as far as God is concerned it's clear and that is what marks out the people of God they may pray that prayer of that man in the New Testament Lord I believe help my unbelief but in praying that prayer they're actually exercising faith and it is that that marks out the people of God nothing else but faith and then as we go through this world with all its ups and downs it swings from triumph to disaster faith is what helps us to cope with that it doesn't teach treat make too much of the triumphs and successes it thanks

God for things when we receive blessings but realizes that they're all tempered with the what's the word they're all affected and I can't remember the word I'm thinking for but are not perfect because they're affected by the things of this world so no triumph sorry tinged that wasn't what I was thinking of but tinged is a good word by the things of this world so no triumph is final no resurrection of this world is final and when things go horribly wrong one way or another we know that that is also to be born with faith because that's how the ancients did it that was what they were commended for that's how Moses and the people of God crossed the Red Sea through faith faith copes with the violent swings of the world because it seeks a better one and so in verses 39 and 40 the writer sums up his discussion he introduced it in verse one saying faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we don't see and then he sums it up in verses 39 and 40 and he points out that in ultimate terms these Old

Testament saints that he's been enumerating had not received what was promised and I think he's implying that neither had his readers at the time the letter was received and neither have we 2,000 or so years later because if we had if they had what would have been the point in the discussion he would have said well look you no longer need faith now because you've got it all and so we are on the same quest as they are we are enduring the same perils of the road to reach our destination but still he says in verse 40 we do have one advantage over them because we have seen the destination in sharper focus we know that all the promises whatever they look like in the Old Testament that in fact ultimately they were all promises of Christ they were all promises that are fulfilled in Christ all the law all the prophets all the blessings of the Old

Testament pointed forward to Christ so at least we have that advantage over those Old Testament heroes of faith that we know that it is together with us as he says in verse 40 that their faith is being made complete but we're still not there yet and so he's going to go on to tell us in verse 12 in chapter 12 verse 1 and 2 to fix our eyes on Jesus we're still on the road and so we need to be sharing in that faith of those Old Testament heroes so let's conclude this part of our worship by singing again