

A Faith That's Possible
Hebrews 11:4–7
May 5, 2024

I imagine that you'd be hard-pressed to find something you do *well* that you haven't *ever* seen someone else do. That is, if you excel in the kitchen, in the garden, with a chainsaw or a pen, you either grew up around someone that excelled in that way, or you eventually met or observed someone else that did. While I'm quite aware of what we call learning styles, *all* of us learn via example.

In fact, the power of example is such that *if* a particular task *seems* to be above your pay grade or outside your skill set, someone else showing you it *can* be done might encourage you to give it a shot. This is especially true in our DIY era powered by Alphabet Incorporated. If you want to build a bookshelf, crochet, learn to code, sauté mushrooms, or solve a Rubik's Cube, there's a video—in fact, *hundreds* of them—waiting to show you how.

Examples both show us that it *can* be done; and they show us *how* it can be done.

Enter Hebrews 11. When we concluded chapter 10, we mentioned how the last few verses of that chapter sort of function as an introduction to chapter 11. And how did those verses describe the state of those reading this book? Hebrews 10:36: **For you have need of endurance.**

They were struggling to endure in their faith. In fact, *that's* the occasion—both text and subtext—for the book itself. The author pleads with them not to turn back to that which is lesser. Repeatedly he holds forth Christ *so that* they might hold fast their confession.

What these readers were continually facing—social alienation/heightened persecution—was something they didn't know if they *could* endure. And as simple as it might sound, much of the function of Hebrews 11 is show them—and us—that enduring faith is possible.¹ By listing example after example in this chapter—in fact, running out of time when listing them (v. 32)—the author endeavors to show them, first, that enduring faith *can* be done. And, secondly, *how* it can be done.

1. Two Examples of Faith (vv. 4–5)

When we start chapter 11, we quickly read its definition of faith—**the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen** (11:1). By that faith, the men of old gained approval (v. 2). Then, in verse 3, the author begins with Genesis 1:1. *Ex Nihilo*—out of nothing—the worlds were made (11:3).

Now, if you were going to tell the story of faith in the Old Testament—beginning *at the beginning*—what would you mention *after* you speak of creation? Maybe you *could* do something from Genesis 2, though Adam and Eve's circumstances pre-fall don't have a *lot* in common with these Jewish Christians having their property seized, their beliefs laughed at, and their friends imprisoned. It'd be a tough sell to start in Genesis 2. And though there is a silver lining in Genesis 3—(3:15)—nor is that chapter the first place you'd go to detail a faith intended to encourage suffering believers.

After alluding to Genesis 1, Genesis 2 and 3 don't seem to make the cut. But what about Genesis 4? Verse 4: **By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain.** Though interpretations abound, based on the scant evidence many conclude that Cain did not offer the best of his crops.² That's certainly a plausible interpretation. Regardless, it's clear *both* in Genesis *and* in Hebrews that his brother Abel offered **to God a better sacrifice.**

¹ Chris Bruno, Jared Compton, and Kevin McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, NSBT, 179.

² Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 344.

In Genesis we're not told *why* or *how* Abel brought something better. But we are told *what* he brought: the **firstlings of his flock** (Gen. 4:4). Whatever it is that his brother did, Abel offered that which was best. *Why* did do so? Genesis doesn't tell us; but Hebrews does: **by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice.**

Why else would someone give away their best? You'd have to believe something about the One you offered it to. By faith Abel offered to God. To further that emphasis, when the next clause begins with, **through which**, it's referring back to Abel's faith as well.³ So, through "faith," verse 4, **he obtained the testimony that he was righteous.** Obtaining the testimony means he received approval.⁴ Or, as the ESV translates it, that he was commended.

Commended by whom? The next clauses answers: **God testifying about his gifts.** Abel obtained the testimony that he was righteous from God Himself. And it wasn't *merely* that his gift was *better*, it was the *why* behind his better gift, his faith. The same God that justified Abraham, the same God that can justify you, is the One that justified Abel. God testified that Abel was righteous—**by faith.**⁵ Isn't that what verse 2 said as well? **By it (faith) the men of old gained approval.**

However, *did* that faith—or even God's approval of him—mean that all went smoothly for Abel? No. Though God approved, Cain did not. 1 John says that Cain **slew his brother.** Then John asks: **And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.** We might ask, "How long has faith—that which is righteous—been opposed by some aspect of humanity?" Well, the fall occurs in Genesis 3; men hating faith kicks off chapter 4. It's been going on a while.

Abel believed God; and it cost him his life. Faith *didn't* mean all went well. Nor did it for Moses, for Jeremiah, nor Ezekiel, nor Daniel, nor the Apostle Paul, nor Adoniram Judson, nor Amy Carmichael, nor Corrie Ten Boom. In fact, after 1 John speaks of Cain and Abel, it instructs those reading that letter: **Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you** (1 John 3:13).

However, that's not the *whole* story. Verse 4 continues: **and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.** It seems that Abel's suffering—even his death—didn't have the final word. The tidiest conclusion concerning what this means is that Abel's faith continues to speak to us through the Scriptures.⁶ And that's absolutely true.

But it's also true that, though Cain murdered him, Abel **still speaks.** There's a compelling argument to be made that this chapter is structured in such a way that within Hebrews 11 are essentially two lists, the first from verse 3 to verse 31, and a second from verses 32 to 38. And *if* we acknowledge that structure—the two lists—there's a compelling argument that at the *center* of each list is the hope of resurrection.⁷

But even if you *don't* accept that structural case, the aspect of salvation emphasized *throughout* the book of Hebrews has been that which is future. Further, one of the central commands in the entire book instructs us to **hold fast the confession of our hope** (10:23). And in *this* particular chapter a key aspect of faith is the **assurance of things hoped for** (11:1). Hebrews looks forward. As we'll see, the Hebrew saints looked forward.⁸

³ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 304.

⁴ Harris, 304.

⁵ Schreiner, 344.

⁶ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 527.

⁷ From verses 17–19 concerning Abraham and Isaac and then, in verse 35 for the second list. Some would say the two lists are chiasms, where at the center of the list we'd find out what the entire list is about. For more on this, see Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology*, 166–168.

⁸ That's what verse 16 will declare, **they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.**

So, though Abel's gift *from* faith cost him his life, from another angle, the gift *of* faith gave him life. What happened to him—the suffering he endured—was not able to touch what *would* happen to him. Though dead, he *still* speaks.

In this long, well-known list Abel is the first example of faith. In one sense it shows us that faith can and does often lead to suffering. We ought not hide that reality. Yet this example would've also shown those reading that others had persevered by faith in the midst of challenging circumstances.⁹ Abel did. Many others have as well.

Yet, as we'll see, the examples in chapter 11 aren't *limited* to faith's sufferings. The author lists numerous examples of faith's triumphs.¹⁰ We'll see momentarily that Noah and his family are delivered. Then next week we'll read that Sarah conceives (v. 11) and Abraham's descendants are as the stars of heaven (v. 12). The following week we'll note that Isaac didn't die on the altar (v. 19). Then, we'll read about the Israelites passing through the Red Sea (v. 29) and eventually that the walls of Jericho fell down (v. 30).

The point is this: in the story of Israel, there were *both* faith's sufferings *and* faith's triumphs. The latter is behind the second example given in Hebrews 11. Verse 5: **By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up.**

The author of Hebrews is *definitely* a preacher. How do I know that? Because at the beginning of this sermon he's only moved one chapter, from Genesis 4 to Genesis 5. It seems that he can't wait to walk through *each* and *every* character of faith methodically and convincingly. And yet, if we keep reading, we note that—like many preachers since—by necessity he ends up having to pick up the pace. And then, before the chapter ends, he realizes he's run out of time.

But—for now—we're at a snail's pace walking through Genesis. In Genesis 4, Abel suffers for his faith. In Genesis 5, Enoch doesn't. In one sense, the characters are put in contrast. Unlike Abel, Enoch doesn't die. He's delivered from death.

In another sense, the characters *aren't* put in contrast. Note *why* Enoch is taken up, why he doesn't see death. Verse 5's "for" tells us *why*: **for he obtained the witness.** That's the same word used for "obtained the testimony" back in verse 4 concerning Abel. Though Abel died and Enoch didn't, God testified in the same terms concerning them both. What is it that God said about Enoch? **For he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.**

Even though I'm trying to save verse 6 for the next point, I'm going to dip into it here to show the connection between Abel and Enoch. Verse 4 says that it was through "faith" that Abel obtained the testimony that he was righteous. Verse 5 says that Enoch obtained the witness that **he was pleasing to God.** So, what's the connection between these two characters—Abel and Enoch—and what's the connection between faith and pleasing God? Verse 6: **And without faith it is impossible to please Him.**

We really need Romans to connect all the dots, but to put it simply: faith pleases God. Why? Because true and saving faith is to trust the One in whom He speaks—His Son. Hebrews 5 describes Him as **having been made perfect**, who also became **the source of eternal salvation** (Heb. 5:9). Faith, as understood in the New Testament, isn't faith in faith; it's to cast all of our hope on Him. That kind of faith is the *only* thing that pleases the Father. As Chris reminded us last week, it's faith's *object* that matters, the person and work of the Son of God.

Enoch's faith triumphed. When we get to the end of Hebrews 11, we'll see that one of the reasons the author lists each of *these* instances—both the sufferings and the triumphs—is in order to point forward.¹¹ So, how might we understand these instances where God delivered? They're what

⁹ Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, *Biblical Theology*, 179.

¹⁰ Again, the language of Bruno, Compton, and McFadden.

¹¹ Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, 179.

we might call a “type.” As the tabernacle and the land pointed forward to something else, so do the lives of those we read about in the Old Testament. In other words, when God conquered death for Enoch, by faith, that triumph foreshadowed a better one His people await.

This is how the list begins. We’re given these two examples, united by faith but distinguished by outcome. We might ask, “What if we were *only* given Abel?” What if suffering is the only example of faith’s outcome? Would that be accurate? Or what if we were *only* given Enoch? What if triumph were the only example of faith’s outcome? What that *alone* be accurate?

No, we need both. Faith includes suffering. Others have gone before us to show us endurance is possible. You can endure. It’s possible. Others have done it. But it’s not *just* suffering. Throughout history, faith has also included triumph. So not only *can* you endure, by faith you will.

2. Two Aspects of Faith (v. 6)

We note these two aspects in verse 6: **And 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 seek Him.** We’ve already discussed the connection between faith and pleasing God. But verse 6 puts a point on it by stating the *opposite* reality: **without faith it is impossible to please Him.** That means all our efforts to accrue some degree of favor or commendation from God *apart* from faith fall short.

If you recall, one of the earliest warning passages concerned the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness (Heb. 3–4). And what was one of the primary reasons they failed to enter the land of promise, to experience the rest God offered? Hebrews 3:19: **So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.** Faith pleases God. *They* didn’t believe.

And if we’re *still* not convinced concerning the connection between faith and the pleasure of God, recall what Paul writes about those unbelieving wanderers in 1 Corinthians: **with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness** (1 Cor. 10:5). Then hear what Paul wrote *next* concerning the wilderness generation: **Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved** (1 Cor. 10:6).

So, what’s going on in verse 6? Right in the middle of this great chapter on faith, the author’s once again—briefly but sternly—warned us. Verse 6: **without faith it is impossible to please Him.**

Having warned the readers, having established the connection between faith and God’s pleasure in His people, he now gives us two aspects of this faith that marks all in this list. Verse 6b: **for he who comes to God must believe that He is.** That’s the first aspect. It’s not complicated. The one that draws near to God must believe that He exists.

That’s simple enough. Maybe it seems as if that bar is low. The only ones who *don’t* believe this are the atheists, such a small percentage of people. Yet those categories *outside* our typical faith categories—atheists, agnostics, and those called, “nones”—have a bit more overlap than I think we often realize. And it’s not as small a number of people as we might think. “Nones”—meaning they click “none of the above”—make up about 44% of Millennials and almost 48% of Gen Z. And concerning *overlap* between them and the atheists, my question is this: functionally—or biblically—what’s the difference between someone willing to admit on a poll they *don’t* believe in God and someone that gives little to no evidence of believing He exists, ever?

Regardless of where you land on that question, there are a lot more functional atheists than polls reveal, or we’d like to admit. In fact, we’re surrounded by those to whom “faith” means little to nothing. Some might even choose to gather with us.

That's the first aspect of faith; it's grounded in the *object* of faith.¹² Though simple, it's essential: faith believes God exists.

However, belief that God exists is not *all* that defines faith. *Alone*, that belief is not sufficient.¹³ The *second* aspect of faith noted here prepares us both for Noah and for the balance of the chapter.¹⁴ Verse 6 goes on: **for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.** Some translations make that last clause concerning "reward" a verb, as in "He rewards those who seek Him." To a certain degree, that's true. He *does* that. But the word here isn't a verb; it's a noun. It's not primarily telling us something He *does*, but *who* He is. He not only rewards; He *is* a Rewarder.

If biblical faith is concerned with the *object* of that faith, we're to be crystal clear concerning who He is. We must believe that *He* exists. Who? Not the god we've made in our own image, but the One He's revealed Himself to be. And the testimony of the Scriptures could not be clearer: He *is* a Rewarder.

Is this one of the ways you'd describe Him? Is this a central aspect of what you believe about Him? Some of our struggle with this is due to the fact that we've often defined "reward" wrongly. We often think we know what's best, what we "need," what we "want." And we know *when* we want it. That underlying entitlement might influence the way we define "reward." But then we read Jesus say things like this, **Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, (why?) for your reward in heaven is great** (Matt. 5:11–12).

Verses like that redefine reward for us. And the clarifying of that definition helps us. Because when reward is defined rightly, and God is believed to be *the* Rewarder of those that seek Him, it can actually help us live by faith.

I've mentioned before how I once disagreed with the premise that *future* grace ought to be a motive in the *now* for following Christ. As I've since reflected on that, while *one* of the reasons I disagreed with the premise is because I didn't know my Bible well enough, another reason is because faith hadn't cost me much just yet. Yet, if you follow Christ long enough, obeying His Lordship in each aspect of your life, eventually it *will*. All who desire to live Godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

So, what does Hebrews 11 come and do for those that suffer in the present? It shows us that enduring faith is possible in those difficulties. It *can* be done. But Hebrews 11 also shows us *how* it can be done. Because often, the fuel for *why* you would choose to suffer—to "remain under" suffering—is because you've come to believe something. One of the things you hope for—an assurance you have—is that the One you've considered worthy to suffer for is a Rewarder of those that seek Him.

The saints of old endured. Often, this is *how* they did. If it was social alienation they faced from those around them, they knew their true home was elsewhere, unable to be touched by the ostracism of this world. And if those social pressures led to imprisonment—or eventually to death itself—that couldn't touch their hope either.¹⁵

And that truth, found in verse 6, is a perfect intro to the next example of faith.

¹² Schreiner, 345.

¹³ Schreiner, 346.

¹⁴ Cockerill, 532; Harris, 306.

¹⁵ Bruno, Compton, and McFadden, 167.

3. An Example of this Forward-Looking Faith (v. 7)

The author found an example of faith in Genesis 4 in Abel. Then he found one in the list of names in Genesis 5 in Enoch. Then he turns the page to Genesis 6. And here's what he says about that chapter in verse 7: **By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen.**

Most, if not all, of the children in this room could give us the context. God looked on the earth, **and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth** (Gen. 6:12). While it's common for us to point out the ways children's Bibles or Sunday School teachers tidy up the flood, it might also be worth considering whether we've also tidied up the corruption of humanity pre-flood. Maybe those reading Hebrews thought *their* world was the worst it had ever been. Maybe *we* think that. In Genesis 6, the Lord looked at the wickedness of humanity and saw that **every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually** (Gen. 6:5).

But, before God opens the clouds, and the ground, He warned Noah concerning what was to come. Was it raining at that moment? In fact, had it *ever* rained like it would soon? The answer to both questions is no. That which Noah was warned about he didn't have categories for. It was not *only* unseen, it had *never* been seen.

Yet, he—as faith does—had a **conviction of things not seen**, and was persuaded that what God said would become reality.¹⁶ How do we know he was convinced? The first two words of verse 7 are the short answer, but it's expanded in the balance of verse 7: **By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark.**

In holy fear, he gathered the gopher wood, the pitch, and constructed a 300-cubit long vessel. Genesis 6 says it this way: **according to all that God had commanded him, so he did** (Gen. 6:22). Though his neighbors likely thought he was absolutely insane, by faith, in reverence, he built the ark. Why? He believed what was unseen. In this sense, his faith looked forward.

And not *only* to God's judgment against sin, but to God's good purpose for him. Verse 7 gives us that purpose, saying that Noah, **in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household**. As he looked forward—not only to God's wrath but *also* to God's deliverance—he acted on what God said. Convinced of what was unseen, assured of what's hoped for, as if God were indeed a Rewarder of those that seek Him, Noah prepared an ark.¹⁷

And the Rewarder rewarded him. Verse 7 ends with this clause, describing what happened after Noah built the ark, **by which he condemned the world**. You don't need an imagination to know that Noah would've faced opposition in his day. Genesis 6 says the world was corrupted. 2 Peter calls Noah a preacher of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). Like Abel, like those reading this letter, like us, he was opposed by those around him.

Yet, the Rewarder rewarded. The ark had a clear purpose: the **salvation of his household**. But what else awaited Noah? Verse 7 ends, saying that *in* that salvation, Noah **became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith**. What does that mean?

With the eternal inheritance language earlier in the book (9:15), with next week's example in Hebrews 11 concerning Abraham going out to receive an inheritance (11:8), with the better country language ahead (11:16), along with a host of other factors throughout Hebrews, could it be possible that in using the term "heir" the author points to that which Noah *inherited* post-flood? When the waters receded in Genesis 9, and God set his bow in the sky, what did Noah receive? A new *world*.

¹⁶ Schreiner, 346.

¹⁷ Cockerill, 532.

Though formerly corrupted, God purified it.¹⁸ And then He gave it to Noah. Is *that* deliverance—like Enoch’s—a type, pointing forward to a better deliverance, a better inheritance, to come?

Conclusion

These believers reading the letter of Hebrews needed endurance. So might we. The things *they* faced sometimes made them wonder whether they *could* endure, whether faith was even possible in their circumstances. Maybe we’ve wondered that as well.

So, as we begin this journey through Hebrews 11, we’re initially given two examples, that of Abel and Enoch. And we need *both* examples. Because, like Abel, faith is often accompanied by suffering. We dare not whitewash that sobering truth.

Yet Abel’s example isn’t *all* we’re given. We’re also given Enoch. Because faith doesn’t *only* suffer. God *has* been pleased to deliver, He *is* pleased to deliver, He *will* deliver those that believe. Abel *still* speaks. Enoch escaped death. Noah inherited the world.

With that in mind, it’s worth saying once more that embedded in Hebrews 11 is not *only* that enduring faith *can* and *has* been done, but also *how* it can be. For example, *as* an example, Noah endured by faith, by believing *what* God said, by believing *who* God is, that is, He’s a Rewarder of those that seek Him.

¹⁸ Schreiner, 347.