

## FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY

Hebrews 11:1-16

Key Verses: 11:6,10

**“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.” “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”**

In the previous passage the author urged Hebrew believers: **“Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and the full assurance that faith brings....”** This faith is in Jesus who shed his blood for us, and who serves as our great high priest at the throne of God. This faith is something that we believers now have, a gift of grace bestowed at the moment we accepted Jesus. The author urged in 10:38, **“But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.”** This is a quote of Habakkuk 2:4. It is the third and final time this verse is quoted in the New Testament. It is first quoted in Romans 1:17, where it says, **“The righteous will live by *faith*,”** with the emphasis on faith. In Galatians 3:11 it is quoted, **“...the *righteous* will live by *faith*,”** with the emphasis on righteous. But in Hebrews the emphasis is on live: **“*live* by *faith*.”** Having received a precious faith in Jesus, we need to learn to live by faith in the real world. How? In chapter 11 the author points us to wonderful examples of faith from the Old Testament. They show us what it looks like to live out our faith in real life. This faith is not just about a belief system or religious ideology. It is a living faith in a living God through Jesus Christ that impacts our lives powerfully. It is faith that pleases God and is rewarded by God. We will study chapter 11 in three parts. Verses 1-16 focus on Abraham’s faith, and verses 17-29 on Moses’ faith. Verses 30-40 reveal how God makes perfect in Jesus both Old and New Testament believers. In today’s lesson, the author sets forth the essence of faith (1-3). He describes the ancients’ faith which was expressed through acts and life (4-7). Then he teaches us the faith of Abraham and the patriarchs, which looked forward to the heavenly city (8-16).

**First, the essence of faith (1-3).** In verse 1 the author explains two ways in which faith that pleases God is manifest. It says, **“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”** Here the word **“confidence”** means that which provides the basis for trust and reliance; it is from the Greek word which means “title deed.” This faith is something we

## **FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

possess as our own, though we do not see it. It is not vague, but certain, based on what God has promised. The words **“what we hope for”** are most often translated “things hoped for.” The emphasis is not on “we” but on the “hope.” So this faith is not a blank check to demand from God what we desire. Rather, it is rooted in hope based on God’s promises. God’s promises focus on salvation through the Messiah. God fulfilled his promises by sending Jesus as the Messiah. God saved us from our sins through Jesus and opened the new and living way to have fellowship with him. When Jesus comes again this hope of eternal salvation will be fully realized. This is God’s promise confirmed with his oath. God wants us to hold on to this promise. This is our hope. Faith is confidence in what we hope for.

Faith is also the assurance of what we do not see. Here the word **“assurance”** comes from the Greek *“elenchos”* (ἔλεγχος), which means “convicting evidence that makes someone fully agree, understand and realize the truth or validity of something.” Though we do not see God or spiritual realities with our eyes, we are certain of their existence. There are two kinds of phenomenon: seen and unseen. God is Spirit; he is unseen. So, without faith, we cannot see God. Two people stand on the deck of a ship. One person sees the surface of the ocean and thinks there is nothing there, because he cannot penetrate its depth with his eyes. But the other person knows that abundant life and treasures lie beneath the surface, even though he cannot see them. Faith is spiritual eyesight that sees invisible realities. Paul taught the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit reveals these realities, saying, **“This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words”** (1Co 2:13). So Paul prayed for the Ephesians: **“I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened...”** (Eph 1:18a). When we look at the Scriptures with human eyes, they seem to be one of many religious books. But when we look with the eyes of faith, they are the living words of God which lead us to Jesus, the source of eternal life, wisdom, strength and all that we need to live a fruitful life. This is the power source to overcome the world and live as children of God. Verse 2 says, **“This is what the ancients were commended for.”** The word **“commended”** means that God approved of them. In the world people approve of those with power, money and social status. But God approves of people who have faith in him.

## **FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

Verse 3 teaches us a great blessing of faith. It says, **“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.”** Human beings ask fundamental questions, including: “Where did everything come from, including me?” “What is the meaning of my life?” Though these questions are so important, many intellectuals have largely given up on finding answers. Many no longer believe an objective reality that adequately explains human existence and its meaning. It seems that each person is left to formulate their own answer, and what they conclude may be bizarre. But when faith in God is planted in our hearts, it informs us that God created the heavens and the earth by the word of his mouth. With this faith, we can know for sure that we came from God and go back to God. We can find the meaning and purpose of creation and see its beauty and harmony and praise the Creator God. This wonderful understanding comes only by faith.

**Second, the ancients’ faith (4-7).** In these verses the author talks about three heroes of faith: Abel, Enoch and Noah. Abel lived just after the Fall. His parents had the sweet memory of fellowship with God in the garden, but were now separated due to their sin. It was a question whether there was a way back to God. Then Abel and Cain brought offerings to worship God. God accepted Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. God commended Abel as righteous. The acceptance of the offering was evidence that God accepted the person. Cain’s offering was not accepted because he was not accepted. In this way God showed us that there is a way to be approved by him; it is by faith. Abel was murdered by Cain. Even though he is dead, by faith he still speaks. His message is that God approves of those who come to him by faith.

Enoch’s life was summarized by the words “he walked with God” (Gen 5:22,24). When we look at Jude 14-16, we learn that it was not easy for him to walk with God. The world of his time was filled with ungodliness and the defiant words of ungodly sinners, grumblers and fault-finders, who followed their own evil desires. But Enoch lived a godly life and preached the message of God’s judgment. He did not compromise with the world but spent his time in fellowship with God. One day he could not be found. It was because God had taken him away. The word **“taken”** *metatithēmi* (μετατίθημι Gr.) means more than changing locations; it implies transformation of the body, which made it fit to live in the heavenly kingdom. Enoch did not experience death. The Bible clearly says that the wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23). No one can be

## **FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

an exception to this. But when we please God with faith, God can exempt us from the power of death. Jesus promised that whoever believes in him crosses over from death to life (Jn 5:24).

Based on Enoch's faith, the author explains the faith that pleases God. Let's read verse 6. **“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.”** The author emphasizes that we can please God only by faith; there is no other way. Sometimes we think that by doing some activity faithfully, God will be pleased. But God is not moved by our outer activity; God sees our hearts. People see results, but God sees the inner motives of the heart. God is pleased when his people recognize who he truly is and trust him from their hearts and come to him. According to the author, there are two elements that faith must have in order to please God: that God exists and that God rewards those who earnestly seek him. Believing that God exists is more than believing there is a God. Even the demons believe that—and shudder (Ja 2:19). The word **“exists”** is related to God's existence as revealed to Moses when God said, **“I am who I am”** (Ex 3:14). God met Moses personally and showed himself to be living, eternal and almighty. This God is concerned about his people and redeems them from miserable bondage. This God is holy, loving and good. Moses surrendered to this God and lived as his servant the rest of his days. We can believe this God exists when we meet him. I met this God personally at a summer Bible conference many years ago, while writing a testimony in my dorm room. It was the turning point in my life. After meeting God, we need to continually recognize God's existence. When we face difficulties and persecution, or when injustice prevails, we may wonder, “Where is God?” “Why does he allow these things to happen?” It is good to ask these questions. But we should do so with faith that God exists. When we do, the eyes of faith enable us to penetrate beyond the surface of things to perceive the good purpose of an almighty God at work even in the most difficult times. When Apostle Paul exercised this kind of faith with a broken heart for his Jewish people, he found the amazing sovereign rule of God and could not but burst into a song of praise to God (Ro 11:33-36). This faith pleases God. On the other hand, if we do not trust him, it is offensive. It is comparable to a child telling his parents that they do not exist. When we trust God fully, he is pleased with us and is ready to bless us.

## **FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

Another aspect of faith that pleases God is that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Some people think that to seek a reward from God is dishonorable. But when we do not seek a reward from God, we may seek a reward from people. Moreover, we may suffer from a sense of loss. What is God's reward? God's reward is eternal life and his kingdom. Furthermore, it is God himself. God said, "I will be their God and they will be my people" (8:10b). God said to Abraham, "**I am...your very great reward**" (Gen 15:1b). To freely come to God and have fellowship with God is a great reward. When heroes of faith believed that God rewards them, they could overcome all kinds of hardships and live a victorious life.

When Noah was warned about things not yet seen—the judgment to come—in holy fear he built an ark to save his family (7a). Building an ark is not a small matter. It was huge and required a great investment of time and resources; it required his life's devotion for 120 years. The people of Noah's time ignored God's message of judgment and went on eating and drinking as though they would enjoy this world forever. Noah was mocked as a foolish old man. But when the judgment came, he was proved as a righteous and wise man. By faith he built an ark to save his family and condemned the world and became the heir of righteousness (7b). I know many sacrificial servants of God who work hard to love and support their families. In addition, they spend time on evenings and weekends to share the gospel of salvation with young people who don't know Christ. They do this to obey the world mission command. To human eyes, it may seem foolish; yet they are as wise as Noah and this will be proved in God's time.

**Third, the faith of Abraham and the patriarchs who looked forward to the heavenly city (8-16).** Abraham is known as the father of the nation Israel and the father of faith of all believers; he was also called "the friend of God" (2Ch 20:7). How did he become so? Verse 8 says, "**By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.**" When God called Abraham, he gave him a command and promises. God commanded him to leave his country, people and father's household, and go to the place he would show him. God promised to make his name great and to make him into a great nation and to bless all nations on earth through him. God had a great plan and vision for world salvation through this one man. But it was not easy for Abraham to follow God's plan. It was too big to accept and required too

## **FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

great a sacrifice. God did not show him the details, but only the direction and vision. How did Abraham respond? By faith he obeyed and went. He trusted God fully with his life and family and future. He did not obey reluctantly, but willingly. He was thankful for God's calling and built an altar to the Lord. Christian life begins as a response to God's calling. It requires us to leave the sinful and idolatrous environment of our past lives and follow God's direction, holding on to his promise. How did Abraham live in the Promised Land? He was like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise (9). When he arrived in the foreign country, he was surrounded by ungodly people in a violent culture. So he was fearful, especially that his wife would be taken away. But he did not regret that he had come or make plans to retreat. He never shrank back. Tent life was inconvenient, but he did not try to settle down in an ungodly city, which would have made him complacent and corrupt. He was like a soldier, ready to get up and move at God's command. He was free from the attachments of this world. Usually when we begin to follow God's call, we are full of vision and spirit and willing to live a tent life. But as time passes, and God blesses, it is tempting to settle down and enjoy life in this world. Some people are willing to follow God's calling in their own generation, saying, "I can endure all kinds of sacrifice and hardship, but I don't want my children to live like this." But Abraham did not. He lived in tents to the end and also taught Isaac and Jacob to do the same. He had a clear value system and sense of history. What enabled him to live like that? Let's read verse 10. **"For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."** His hope was not in this world. He knew that everything in this world is like shifting shadows; everything perishes, spoils and fades away. But the kingdom of God, which God built through Jesus' death and resurrection, is eternal; it never fades away. God is the architect and builder. It is a perfect paradise. This is our eternal home. When Abraham looked forward to this heavenly city, he was free from worldly attachments and filled with joy to live as a pilgrim in this world. With this hope, he lived as a citizen of heaven. This hope is something to come in the future. But it formulates in the present and greatly influences our children and future generations.

By faith, even Sarah, though past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise (11). Through Sarah we learn that even in old age we can bear children by faith.

## **FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD I: ABRAHAM LOOKED FORWARD TO THE HEAVENLY CITY**

Sometimes, when we think about our age, it seems to be impossible to engage in disciple-raising among students. But by faith we can overcome the generation gap and bear spiritual children. By the help of Sarah, from this one man Abraham, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore (12). God blessed one man's faith and made a new history. God wants to do great things through one person who has faith in God.

Verses 13-16 are a summary of the patriarchs' faith. They lived by faith to the end of their earthly lives without receiving what was promised. They did not nag God to give them something. They saw what was promised with the eyes of faith and welcomed it from a distance. They persevered. It was possible because their hope was not in this world (13). They did not entertain sentiment about their past lives, but pressed forward, longing for a better country—a heavenly one (16a). God was greatly pleased by their faith. He is not ashamed to be called their God, saying, **“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”** (Ex 3:15). And he has prepared a beautiful, eternal city for them (16b).

God has given us a very precious faith in Jesus Christ. He wants us to live by this faith like the heroes of faith. With this faith we can come to God like Abel, overcome death like Enoch, pass through judgment like Noah and receive the eternal inheritance of God's kingdom like Abraham and the patriarchs. Let's exercise our faith to please God and gain God's reward.