

Fact Sheet for **“The Great Faith Chapter”**
Hebrews 11:1-40

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ESV ¹ ¶ **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

I've heard that verse quoted by seasoned Christians ever since I've been a small boy. The problem was that I really didn't know what it meant. It sounded great, but it didn't seem to work for me. Several times I tried to ramp up my faith... tried to convince myself that what I prayed for, what I didn't see yet, would surely happen. When it didn't happen I could only assume that my faith was somehow flawed or that I was missing something in this passage. Verse 2 made sense. Verse 3 fit well with Genesis 1. But what do you do with verse 4?

⁴ ¶ **By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.**

The story of Cain and Abel is in Genesis 4. Nowhere in that chapter does it speak of Abel's faith. How should you understand this verse? The problem was that my understanding of verse 1 was indeed flawed. There are two critical components of the faith spoken about in verse 1. The first I had to learn the hard way.

1. Faith Is Based on God's Word

When I graduated from seminary Helen and I applied for missionary service in Liberia. I had been on a short-term mission there and loved it. We went through training with the mission, were accepted, and started raising support. I had a good, secure, full-time job that was a 5 minute walk from home. Because of union negotiations we ate lunch on the clock. That meant I only spent 40 hours per week there. I had 128 hours per week that were mine. Well, raising support went slowly. My mission supervisor said that the problem was I wasn't walking in faith. I should quit the job and trust God to meet our needs. Then the support would come in. I still remember the day I walked into work and tendered my resignation. But support didn't come in any quicker, and the next six months almost gave me an ulcer. Often we could only see 10 days ahead financially. I took a minimum wage job I didn't like just to survive. My mission supervisor was angry. A few months later, and in debt, we resigned from the mission. My mission supervisor was then really convinced I lacked faith. I began rethinking the whole issue of faith and came to a rock-solid conclusion. That experience painfully taught me this first component of biblical faith... it is based on God's Word. If He said it we can rely on it.

(By the way, I am using God's word in the same sense as that found in Psalm 119. Today the only authoritative source of God's word that we have is in the Bible. In the first century there were the apostles, the prophets, and of course Jesus Himself.)

God had promised in His word to meet our needs, and He had done that. But God never promised that if I quit that job then raising support would go quicker. That was my wish, not God's plan.

2. Faith Is Seen in Action

The 11th chapter of Hebrews drives this home. Faith is not something that is only in our heads. Faith will have results in our life choices. If I believe (have faith in) God's word I will live by it. I will know it to be true. I will rely on it. I will count on it. And I will do this without looking back. And His word tells me I should live for Him now! Let's go back to verse 1. The word "assurance" speaks of the underlying reality

of the things that are hoped for. The “things hoped for” are those things promised by God, things for which we confidently await. The NET Bible puts it this way...

NET Hebrews 11:1 ¶ Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see.

For instance, we don't yet see with our own eyes eternity with God, yet we are convinced of it... because it is there in God's Word. We don't yet see the full results of our salvation, but we know they will come. We know that we need to honor and obey God (2 Corinthians 5:10). God speaks to our consciences. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is “who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it”. (Ephesians 1:13-14). There is a lot more to come! These change us so that those who have faith in Christ make different life choices than those who don't. Now look at verse 4.

⁴ ¶ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

Cain and Abel obviously had some revelation from God about offerings that is not recorded in Genesis. Abel responded in faith by honoring God and offering his best (Genesis 4:4). It seems that Cain may not have brought his best (Genesis 4:3). In any case he did not respond to God in faith. The following verses make it plain that faith calls for action.

Read 11:5-13

All of these mentioned so far did not receive in their earthly lives everything God had promised, but they knew they would.

Read 11:14-26

Here is a quote on “the reproach of Christ”...

“Remember that the original audience of this epistle wanted to return to the old covenant. They wanted to return to the ceremonial observances of the Law because they were suffering persecution and disgrace for bearing the name of Christ. They thought they could be faithful to the example of Moses if they went back to the Law and followed it exactly as it was given.

The original audience wanted to turn away from the reproach of Christ. They wanted to turn away and leave the disgrace that He brought them by returning to the old covenant system. However, to do so would not evidence the same faithfulness as their hero, Moses, did. Hebrews 11:26 tells us that rather than turning away from the reproach of Christ, Moses embraced it.”¹

Read 11:27-40

1. Faith Is Based on God's Word

2. Faith Is Seen in Action

This understanding of faith fits well within the context of the book of Hebrews. The recipients of this book had paid a price for their faith in Christ (10:32-34). Now it was their turn to step up to the plate.

Think about the first verse of this chapter again.

We face different pressures today. Politically Christians are being asked to compromise their faith... creation vs. evolution, sexual morality, even a push to accept all beliefs as valid. How is your faith? Are you willing to bear the reproach of Christ? Are you willing to put your faith in action?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/reproach-christ>.