

# Seeing is NOT Believing: Faith Versus Sight in Hebrews

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## **INTRODUCTION**

We've all heard, and likely used, phrases like "The Heroes of the Faith," or "The Hall of Fame of Faith" to describe Hebrews 11. Those titles are fine as far as they go but often the sermons, lectures, books, chapters, and articles that use such titles tend to deal with chapter 11 in the abstract, apart from the context Hebrews. The result is that chapter 11 becomes something like a collection of *WW#D?* What would Abraham do? What would Moses do? What would Samson do? I doubt anyone has proposed *WWSD*, but he is in the chapter and if we take the "Heroes" approach, we need to include him. One of various problems with this perspective on Hebrews 11 is that the answer is, inevitably, "he'd believe, just like you need to believe." The real danger here is that what is arguably the single-most faith focused chapter in the Bible becomes, ironically, about what we *need to do*. The minute we start looking at the various characters in this chapter and say "you *need to believe just like Abraham believed*," there is a high probability that we will turn faith back in on ourselves, the exact opposite

direction that faith takes. Faith always looks outside itself for hope, help, and assurance. The person of faith is not a hero. The only true hero is the object of faith, Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of God's promise to which all the characters in chapter 10 looked forward. If we preach, teach, or just read Hebrews 11 and the only application we come up with is, "Now go and believe likewise," then the believer and his or her effort or determination to believe becomes the focus. The object of faith, Jesus, is replaced by the subject, the believer. If we read chapter 11 and only think, "These people put my faith to shame (which, by the way, they do) I'd better start believing more," we have, probably unconsciously, made ourselves both the subject and the object of faith. I am absolutely not denying that the characters in this chapter are exemplars, models of faith after whom we are meant to pattern our lives. The characters are exemplars in so far as they show us the true nature of faith. In Enoch, Moses, Abraham and the rest, we have examples of people who looked outside themselves, looked beyond and through what they could see with their eyes, and put their trust in God. The star of the chapter, however, is God and his promise in Jesus.

### **ENOUGH FAITH?**

The author of Hebrews does not mean for these characters to make his audience feel guilty about how they don't believe enough. Rest assured, no reader, myself first and foremost, believes enough. On the other hand, we don't need a warehouse of faith, but only a mustard seed. We must not, however, fall into the trap of making the seed metaphor about quantity. When Jesus commends a mustard seed of faith (Matt 17:20), he's not talking about a measure but saying that, for his followers, there is only faith and to resort to anything else leads to certain failure. Either trust God or trust yourself. So when he condemns them for having "little" faith, we should read "little" as *no* faith. If "little" means size of faith, then why illustrate the faith that's needed with a mustard seed? If quantity is the point it would make more sense to say "a barn full." Faith, however, is not a matter of either quantity or quality, not a thing that can be measured and never a thing about which we can say, "I have *this* much faith," or "I have *enough* faith."

### **Only God “Measures” Faith**

To be sure, there are examples in the Gospels when Jesus declares that people have astonishing faith, particularly in contrast to those who don't believe. The Centurion (Matt 8:10), the woman with a hemorrhage (Luke 8:48), the blind man on the road to Jericho (Luke 19:42), are all examples of people in whom Jesus recognized true faith. In none of those examples do we see people measuring, judging, or declaring their own faith—it is Jesus who declares their faith. Faith always cries out, in one voice with the father who brought his demon possessed son to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief.” The examples in Hebrews 11 are just the same. It is the author's interpretation and God's commendation of their faith that counts. As readers are well aware, all the characters in their own OT narratives were often marked by doubt, uncertainty, contradictions, and sometimes outright sinfulness. In their original narrative contexts they are not “heroes of faith,” they are, however, people who believed, however imperfectly, that God did, will, and therefore does keep his promises.

### **WE “SEE” JESUS**

If I could go back in time and ask my grandmother to tell me about faith, or to define it, I have no doubt she would have quoted Hebrews 11:1 from memory. My grandmother knew the Bible as well or better than anyone I've known. I imagine the verse is familiar to you too: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>1</sup> My grandmother would have called that a “definition” of faith. It seems to make sense to call it a definition since, after all, the author does say, “Faith is the . . .” For various reasons scholars like to point out that 11:1 isn't really so much a definition of faith but a description of what faith *does* or *looks like* generally or specifically in the context of Hebrews. Is it a “definition” in the sense of it being a comprehensive, universal end-all-be-all statement of faith? No, it isn't. There is, however, nothing wrong with calling it *a* definition.<sup>2</sup> No one is going down the primrose path to destruction for thinking 11:1 is a definition. We can at least agree that it serves as a contextual definition in Hebrews. I would say that it goes beyond a mere contextual definition and should be at the heart of any attempt to “define” biblical faith. Nevertheless, the statement in 11:1 will be clearer, and so less an abstraction, if set in the context of the letter. A context built on the idea that we *see* Jesus.

### ***The Context of Faith in Hebrews***

Before turning to chapter 11 there is some groundwork needed to set it in its context. Contrary to how we might think of “faith” specifically in Hebrews, focused as we usually are on chapter 11, the author lays down the foundation from the beginning. Simply put, before the author begins his argument in earnest, he sets the entire letter in the context of faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s entire plan. Recall the memorable opening line: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (1:1-2). That is not merely a dramatic introduction to get readers’ attention—though it does—but a summary statement of the main theme of the entire letter. Jesus is the divinely appointed heir, the end-point and goal of God’s speaking to the world. God spoke creation into existence (Gen 1:3ff) through his Son and now speaks his final word to the world in and through him. Soon after, having begun his argument for the supremacy and finality of Jesus, the author sets his reader’s lives squarely at the convergence of the past and the future. Through believing the Apostolic witness in the present, they look back on God’s past work in Jesus that secures salvation and the future (2:3). That, in a nutshell, is faith. Based on God’s perfect track record in the past in Jesus, which secures his promise for the future, we live in the present by faith.

The author continues building this foundation when he says that God has subjected the world to Jesus in fulfillment of Psalm 8:4-6 to such an extent that there is “nothing outside his control” (2:6-8). He then makes an unmistakable contrast between the experience of physical sight and perception and the experience of seeing by faith: “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:8-9). We do not *see* the world subjected to Jesus, yet according to God the Father revealed in the Apostolic word of the cross, the world is absolutely subjected to him. So Jesus rules and reigns over the world with supreme and sovereign power, but where is the proof? There is, quite simply, no proof other than the Apostolic word of the Gospel. Yes, the Apostolic word was attested by “signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:4), but those things witnessed to the authenticity of

the word about Jesus, they didn't *prove* anything in and of themselves. Signs and wonders pointed to the greater thing, they were (nor are) the thing itself. Keep that idea in mind as you read on.

For us, 2000 plus years of history has done nothing if not underscore the fact that the world *looks* anything but subjected to Jesus. Violence, injustice, murder, war, and a global pandemic dominate the news and, as a result, our thoughts. On a personal level, the ongoing struggles with temptation, sin, failure, and general malaise, leave us equally in doubt about Jesus' sovereignty. Doubt, by the way, doesn't have to be conscious or much less expressed out loud. Our practical doubt, however, is evident in our various attempts to create order, to fix ourselves, to justify ourselves, to reach out for what appears to give relief or some sense of stability. Of course there are times of joy, peace, fulfillment and contentment too, but even good things have a subtle way of drawing our attention to what we see as a reason to believe. In other words, everything we see often lines up and asks, "Did God actually say...?" (Gen 3:1).

Over against the visual, experiential, and perceivable, there is a different kind of seeing, namely the seeing by faith. As the author says, we don't see everything subjected to Jesus at the moment, "but we *see* him" reigning as king having conquered sin and death for our sake (2:8-9). It is by faith, alone, that we see Jesus. It sounds so simple, but the challenge to believe is the greatest challenge we face on a daily basis. The same was true for the original audience of Hebrews.

### *Christ is the Goal*

The problem(s) Hebrews addresses may be summarized in a similar way: "Did God actually speak once and for all in Jesus?" The author writes to people on the brink of disaster, a disaster of faith. His purpose is to forestall a death-march back into something that was never meant to be permanent and that had fulfilled exactly the role for which God intended it. The Mosaic covenant was never a stopping point in God's eternal plan, never a source of salvation. That covenant, through which God spoke with one purpose above all is over. God's speaking through that covenant, including the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices and even Moses himself, ended when he spoke finally in his Son. The draw of the Mosaic covenant had on the Jewish Christian audience was fueled by sight. They could *see* it, touch it, feel it, smell

it, experience it, and connect to it personally. In that way, they were doubly mistaken for not only was the Mosaic covenant fulfilled, the things in it were always and only pointing to something beyond themselves. Their desire to go back reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the covenant itself. So, it is three strikes and you're out. The Mosaic covenant is past; strike one. The Mosaic covenant could not, nor was meant to, save; strike two. The Mosaic covenant only pointed to something else, and it (he) has come; strike three.

To be sure, the draw back to the Mosaic covenant was not simply a matter of sight over faith. Also, don't confuse "sight" with only physical seeing. The author is not saying essentially, "Your problem is that you like the Mosaic covenant because it's filled with things you can see." It is not that simple. They were undoubtedly influenced by various things such as culture, history, social pressures, and confusion about how the coming of Jesus affected or connected to the Mosaic covenant. The audience was not only interested in the trappings of the covenant. They were under substantial pressure from without to (re)conform to their ancestral heritage. There is, however, an unmistakable contrast between the many aspects of the Mosaic covenant the author addresses and the new reality of faith in Jesus as the fulfillment of the entire covenant. The priesthood, the temple, the sacrifices, and Law itself, all offered tangible evidence of the covenant and membership in the covenant. The issue is, however, that they were never *the thing*. Not only were the Hebrews wrong to want to go back, they were wrong about how it functioned all along as well.

Now that Jesus has come, those things have been fulfilled, purposefully replaced by the goal to which they all pointed. Unlike the earthly priests who offered sacrifices perpetually both for themselves and the people (8:3, 5; 9:6-7; 10:11), Jesus, in the order of Melchizedek, came as a perfect high priest leaving no need for others to come after him (7:11-17; 10:12). In contrast to the earthly tabernacle containing the Holy place with a lampstand, table, and bread of the Presence, the Most Holy Place containing the golden altar, arc, and urn, Aarons staff, and the tablets of the Law (9:1-5), Jesus entered "a more perfect tent, not made by hands, that is, not of this creation" (9:11). Over against the blood of the sacrifices (9:19-22) that could never deal finally with sin and which served as a constant reminder of sin (10:3-4), Jesus, the priest, offered his own blood as a sacrifice once and for all (9:12; 10:12-14). In place of and in fulfillment of the earthly priesthood,

tabernacle, and sacrifices, there is forgiveness, reconciliation and peace with God through Jesus (10:19-22).

### *Heavenly Shadows*

The problem the author addresses runs much deeper than the simple difference between the tangible elements of the Mosaic covenant and faith in Jesus. As mentioned above, it can't be boiled down to the Mosaic covenant being merely sight—the problem is they failed to recognize that the priesthood, Temple, and sacrifices were, from the very inception of the Mosaic covenant, were only reflections of a greater, heavenly reality. The author makes this point more than once. The priests “serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5), meaning that the very plans for and construction of the tabernacle/temple and all its furnishings were *always* pointing to something beyond themselves. He also calls the entire sacrificial system “copies of the heavenly things” (8:23), again emphasizing their transitory nature as signs of something greater. What he says in this regard is not only essential for understanding Hebrews, but for our entire conception(s) of redemptive history. We tend to think of redemptive history, promise and fulfillment, or even typology as moving along tied inevitably to the passing of time, a linear line moving from creation to new creation. The author of Hebrews however, while of course sharing that chronological perspective, doesn't just draw a line moving from A to B historically; his line starting with the Mosaic covenant points up *then* forward—like a right triangle (if that helps).<sup>3</sup> In other words, what the Hebrews were on the verge of missing is what many in the nation of Israel missed throughout their history (not that we should boast of doing much better), namely, that the entire covenant was a sign of a greater, heavenly reality, and never the reality itself. The tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices were meant to lead worshippers to see though them by faith up to God and his promises past, present, and future. That's why it was a fatal error to turn back to the Mosaic covenant. Turning back meant abandoning God's revelation of himself in Jesus, the fulfillment of all his promises, in favor of earthly trappings that never contained the reality to begin with. The conflict between faith and sight isn't a new covenant invention, the distinction is built in from the start. That's what paves the way to reading chapter 11 in context.

*Recalled to Faith with a Warning*

The end result of the author's discussion concerning the fulfillment of the Mosaic covenant in Jesus is a plea for faith. Since believers (and he speaks to them as believers), may enter God's presence on the basis of Jesus' blood fully persuaded that he is the great high priest over God's house—not an earthly man-made house—he enjoins them to “draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). Why can they have such confidence? Because “he who promised is faithful” (10:23). The one who was faithful in the past and who offers full forgiveness without question is the one who promises their future. With that past and future foundation they can persevere in the present looking forward to the coming day of salvation (10:25).

The promise does not come without a warning. Though the warning in chapter 6 gets the lion's share of attention, the warning in chapter 10 is every bit as stark and definitive. He warns about continuing to “sin deliberately” after receiving the Gospel (10:26). The deliberate sin is fundamentally the sin of unbelief—recall the first warning in 3:12: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” Drawing an analogy from the Mosaic covenant, the author argues from the lesser to the greater. Sin against the Mosaic covenant resulted in death (10:28). So, if sin against God in a covenant that was temporary and which served to point to a greater covenant was punished by death, how much more will sinning against the once for all sacrifice of Jesus be punished (10:29)? I often put it this way when lecturing to my students: “If sin was that serious in a covenant ratified by the blood of animals that could not save and was administered by human priests, why do we act like sin is really no big deal in a covenant ratified by the blood of Jesus the great and final high-priest?” Falling into “the hands of the living God” (10:31), is not *less* dreadful in light of the revelation of God in Jesus than it was during the time of promise. It is, in fact, *more* dreadful. The warning is meant to snap them back to the reality—the draw backwards to Moses meant nothing less than rebellion against Jesus.

Notice that their sin of unbelief was not just a failure mentally to agree to some propositions about Jesus. Biblical faith is not mere mental assent to truth. That does not deny cognitive agreement, but we must differentiate biblical faith from the way we, say, believe the earth revolves around the sun. I mentally assent to that solar truth largely because I accept the evidence of



centuries. Biblical faith of course *agrees* with the gospel of Jesus Christ, no doubt. Biblical faith *agrees* to the historicity of the biblical accounts. We can never say less than that, but we must say more in order to speak biblically. Faith, though which we are united to Jesus, preservers in the face of a world that sets itself up to destroy faith. Though faith must be held distinct from the life (or works) that results, it must not be separated from the life it brings in Jesus. The Hebrews slide into unbelief is illustrated through a comparison to their former way of life. Their current way of life was not in keeping with faith. This is similar to the way the disobedience of Israel revealed their failure to believe (3:19). The author interprets Israel's rebellion in Numbers 14:2 evidence of unbelief.

The author reminds them how they endured suffering, showed love for others who suffered, and put up with injustice in light of their future hope (10:32-33). His purpose is not to fill them with so much guilt that they finally recognize the error of their ways. He is reminding them of what they *have* in Jesus—hope for the future. Freedom, by faith, to live as God's people. The warning here, as all the warnings throughout the letter, is not “you'd better watch out or God's going to get you!” but, a warning founded in grace and hope. The warning, built on his entire case for the excellency and supremacy of Jesus, draws them back to Jesus, draws them back to faith. God's perfect track record in the past guarantees his promise for the future and so provides faith for living in the present. That is precisely the theme that dominates chapter 11.

### **FAITH FROM FIRST TO LAST**

The author says that through faith “the people of old received their commendation” (11:1; see also 11:4, 5, 39). The commendation, or approval, they received is from God. This does not mean that these people managed to drum up enough faith to please God, but that what God approves, what establishes a relationship with him, is faith. To be sure, true faith shows itself in acts of compassion, in perseverance and endurance, and any number of other ways. But obedience is by faith. The order cannot be reversed. Obedience does not lead to faith. That's why every mention of obedience throughout chapter 11 is “by faith.” Another way to put it is that faith itself is not something *done*, but that which rests in God and trusts that God keeps his promises. I

understand what people mean by “active faith,” but it’s more accurate to say “acts of faith.” Believing God keeps his promises is what frees and enables obedience. Faith is the foundation of a life that is pleasing to God. Faith is what makes the characters here (and us too) acceptable to God. The idea of commendation from God on the basis of faith runs throughout the chapter. The thing to note is that faith is not simply a new covenant issue, but that from the beginning of human history, faith has always been the basis for acceptance with God.

### ***Faith in the Creator***

In a rush to get to the “heroes” we might miss the point the author makes about faith and the creation. The hope and assurance of the future is always rooted in God’s past which is also grasped by faith. The phrase “God’s past” is something of a misnomer since God has no past, present, or future in the way we perceive time. He who does not have a beginning (Ps 92), who is himself the beginning and the end (Isa 44:6; Rev 22:13), is he who knows the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10). The author points out that it is by faith we know God created the world. The most basic tenet of orthodox Christianity is known only by faith. No amount of evidence, however compelling, proves that God created the world, and much less proves that all we see around us was created from what is invisible. Besides, we can only repeat the idea that God created something from nothing. We have no mental or existential analogy for making something from nothing. There is no abstract *ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) theology here nor is the author seeking to prove creation—he simply, like the rest of the biblical authors both OT and NT, asserts it. The earth and all we see around us was not made by hands or from earthly stuff. This idea fits hand in glove with the author’s teaching with regard to the Mosaic covenant. Recall the context from earlier, how the author said the elements of the tabernacle/temple, including the priests, pointed to a heavenly, invisible reality (9:23) and that Jesus entered the temple that was “not made with hands, that is, not of this creation” (9:11). The principle of knowledge of God by faith is the foundation of all knowledge and experience. We know by faith. Before he shows how the OT characters related to God by faith he establishes that at every level we relate to and know God and his works (including his work in Christ) by faith alone. In this sense, the creation itself is God’s past track record which we know and have confidence in by faith.

***Righteousness by Faith: Abel, Enoch, and Noah***

The meaning of the “commendation” of faith becomes clear in verse 4. It was Abel’s sacrifice done in faith that God approved. The author says specifically that God “commended” Abel “as righteous.” The sacrifice itself wasn’t commended as righteousness but, in contrast to Cain, Abel’s faith, demonstrated in the sacrifice, was commended as righteousness. This should get our attention. The author doesn’t simply recount the narrative of Genesis, which focuses on Cain as much or more than Abel, but he interprets it. He will do the same thing with all the characters included in chapter 11. In Genesis, the first time faith and righteousness are used together explicitly is in 15:6: “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Though usually not included in discussions on justification, the writer of Hebrews establishes the roots of the doctrine from Abel. That is not to say that Hebrews 11 is *about* justification in the way that, say, Romans 3-5, Galatians 1-3, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 2:9-10, or Titus 3:3-7 deal with justification, but that the author connects “commendation” from God on the basis of faith to righteousness before God. For the author to interpret the Genesis narrative’s teaching that Abel was “commended as righteous” does mean, however, that the principle of righteousness by faith was not novel even with regard to Abraham, much less the New Covenant. When God declares, or “commends” a person as righteous he does so on the basis of faith. This is how Abel “still speaks” through his faith; not just because there’s a story about him we can read in Genesis, but that through the Apostolic interpretation of the narrative Abel’s faith testifies to what pleases God. Faith pleases God and God commends faith as righteousness in his sight. The author gives us the authoritative reading of the narrative that can and should transform the way we read it in Genesis.

The same is true for the story of Enoch. It takes four verses in Genesis to tell Enoch’s rather enigmatic story (Gen 4:21-24), but it stands out over against short accounts of Adam’s other descendants. Twice in those four verses it says “Enoch walked with God,” (4:22, 24) and then, unlike everyone in the OT but Elijah (2 Kings 2:1, 11), “and he was not, for God took him.” From Genesis we can put together that God had a special relationship with Enoch. In the midst of the downward spiral of human history from Adam to Noah, Enoch is singled out as the one who “walked with God.” It is Hebrews, however, that gives us the details and without which we would have little

to say about Enoch. Like with Abel, Genesis doesn't mention Enoch's faith but according to Hebrews, Enoch was taken by God "by faith" and that he "was commended as having been pleasing to God" (11:5). From what the author says about Abel, we can conclude with confidence that Enoch was "commended as righteous" by faith. This conclusion is further supported by the commentary-like statement that comes next. To make his point unmistakable, the author adds: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (11:6). This statement serves to connect the stories of Abel and Enoch to the rest of the chapter, and to the larger epistle where drawing near to God in Jesus is major theme (4:16; 10:22). The author interprets two brief narratives which form the basis for understanding not only faith in general, but more specifically the people and stories he includes next. Abel and Enoch establish that by faith alone a person is commended as righteous by God, that faith is the only thing pleasing to God, and that a relationship with him, and that God rewards faith. The meaning of "reward" will become clearer below, but the reward is God's future, his promise.

With Noah we come to the first character in Hebrews 11 with a substantial narrative in the OT. For the purpose here, two things from Noah's story need attention. First, in Genesis 6 Noah stands out in stark contrast to the rest of the world engulfed in wickedness and sin (Gen 6:5): "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord;" and, second, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" (Gen 6:9). Notice that the declaration that Noah was righteous took place in the context of judgment and Noah's obedience in building the arc followed on God's revelation of the coming flood (Gen 6:11-22). The story provides the building blocks for faith and unbelief as the deciding factors in salvation or judgment in the rest of Scripture. Ultimately there is only faith or unbelief. Hebrews picks up on this by saying that it was because of faith that Noah, after God warned him of the coming judgment, built the arc (11:7). Noah believed God exists, that he will do what he says, and reward those who believe. By believing Noah "condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." The inheritance is the fulfillment of God's promise which comes to all whose righteousness is by faith alone. Noah did not condemn the world by declaring it condemned, but his faith in God resulting in obedience served as a public witness to the world's unbelief (see, John 16:8-9). Humanity's wickedness and evil were signs of unbelief but

Noah's obedience was a sign that he believed God and was accepted by God, that he was righteous before God. When the author says Noah "became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith," he directly connects Noah to the larger story of righteousness by faith that will become explicit with Abraham. In doing so, Hebrews helps us understand what Genesis 6:9 means by saying Noah was righteous. He is righteous by faith. His obedience is the evidence, but his faith in God is his righteousness. There is no need to separate out notions of righteousness as moral action and righteousness as a legal declaration. God declares those who believe are *righteous* in his sight—the description of those those who *do* righteousness, i.e., they are described as righteous, is declared by God on the basis of faith.

### ***Faith in the Promise: The OT Fathers***

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob function in Hebrews similar to Paul's discussion of Abraham in Romans 4. The audience, while knowing Abel, Enoch, and Noah, were the children of Abraham. The story of Abraham and his sons, and the implications for faith and what is pleasing in the sight of God, predate the Mosaic covenant. Before the priesthood, temple, and sacrifices, there was Abraham, the father of Israel, the man who believed God.

In class I read Genesis 15:6 and ask, "Is this the first time Abraham believes? After all, it's the first time the word for 'believe' appears in the Bible. My students, suspicious that it's a trick question and intuitively assuming it's not the first time Abraham believed, mostly answer, "No." Then I follow up with a second question: "How do you know, based on the Bible that he believed before Genesis 15:5?" Typically I'll get an answer something like this: "He's been following God for years by that point." That answer is correct and shows good biblical sensitivity and awareness. Abraham's faith prior to Genesis 15:5 is implicitly clear in the narrative. A narrative can and does teach faith (or any number of things) just as much as an explicit proposition such as Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:8, or Galatians 2:15-16 teaches faith—narrative just teaches it in a different, implicit, way. Then I ask a third question: "Ok, yes, we can see faith in the narrative, but can anyone give me a specific text that *tells* us that Abraham believed before Genesis 15:6?" Inevitably a student will speak up and say, "Hebrews 11." Right answer.

Again, obedience flows from faith as Abraham sets out from his homeland not knowing exactly where God would lead him but believing that God will

do exactly as he says (11:4; Gen 12:1). Perhaps we could say that he believed in an invisible goal. Hebrews generally follows the order of events but, as before, his point is not a retelling of the narrative but an interpretation of the larger Abraham narrative in light of faith. Next the author draws a distinction already familiar to his readers—Abraham and his sons, heirs of the promise, lived in tents which is contrasted with a fulfillment that went beyond the physical space of land. Not even the Promised Land was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise for they looked beyond to a permanent “city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God” (11:10). Of course neither Abraham nor his sons took possession of the Land in earnest (though see Gen 23:17-20), but that doesn’t negate the point. The land itself, just like the later tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices of the Mosaic covenant, pointed to a heavenly reality.

The mention of Sarah’s faith in regard to the birth of Isaac (11:11) might create some friction for a reader familiar with Genesis 18. Sarah overhears the Lord telling Abraham that in one year she will have a son. Her response may seem something short of faith—she laughs to herself, doubting that a “worn out” woman and an old man would have a child (Gen 18:12). It doesn’t stop there, for the Lord asks her why she laughed when she hear him promise that she will have a son and she lies about it saying, “I didn’t laugh.” The Lord replies, “No, you did” (Gen 18:15). I can fully understand and sympathize with her. I would have laughed, and then sworn adamantly on the nearest available grave that the last thing I’d do is laugh at something the Lord said. Hebrews, however, doesn’t focus on Sarah’s (or any other character’s) moment(s) of doubt, but underscores that God’s promises come only to faith and not on the basis of the person who believes. Faith saves apart from the works or perfection of the believer, otherwise it wouldn’t be faith. As with the rest of the chapter, Sarah teaches us that faith is not perfect, beyond-doubt, certainty, but trust that in the face of doubt and impossible odds God keeps his promises. It is not the strength, quality, or quantity of faith that fulfills the promises, but God who fulfills his own promises. Again, we must not make faith a work that gets what it deserves like a paycheck at work (e.g., Rom 4:4-5). Faith is keenly aware of its imperfections—that’s precisely why it looks away, outside itself, beyond what is seen (including doubts and fears), to God for whom nothing is “too hard” (Gen 18:14).

The writer sums up the Abraham section to this point with a commentary that applies throughout. Those generations of believers, “strangers and exiles” (11:13) who knew this world was not their home, whose lives were spent looking beyond to a “heavenly” country (11:16), all died having not received what was promised (11:13). To put it in the larger context, they died not having entered God’s rest (3:11; 4:3; 4:5; 9). We might hear that and ask, “But didn’t Abraham and Sarah *have* Isaac, and wasn’t he was the son of the promise?” Hebrews answers that question from the same perspective that looks on everything created, whether the world, land, children, or the tabernacle; the fulfillment of the promise is not finally *of* the world for all those things point to something beyond themselves. The promise will come *into* the world from the greater heavenly reality. Yet, they did have the fulfillment of the promise in this sense: having God’s promise is as good as having the fulfillment. Their faith is why God “was not ashamed to be called their God” (11:16), that is, the people commended, approved, and accepted by God are his people by faith and because they are his people, he has a city ready-made for them (11:16). They didn’t receive the city, but that future is confirmed in God’s commendation of their faith.

Hebrews includes the story from Genesis 22 to show that the son of the promise was not himself the promise. Though declared righteous by faith in Genesis 15:6 (which is Moses’ commentary on Gen 15:16, not part of the dialogue), God tested that faith by commanding that he take Isaac up on the mountain and sacrifice him. For the purpose in Hebrews, what matters is that Abraham obeyed because he believed that not even the death of Isaac meant the death of the promise. The author says Abraham believed God would raise him from the dead and that is exactly what God did (11:19). Once Abraham set off up the mountain the thing was as good as done. In other words, Isaac was in a sense sacrificed. The author says that Abraham did get Isaac back figuratively from the dead. On the basis of God’s promise rooted in the past (Gen 12; 15; 17; 18) and guaranteeing the future, Abraham believed even over a grave.

### ***The Vision of Faith: Moses and Israel***

From Moses to Israel the author continues to show that God’s people are those who cling to God’s promise. Again Hebrews offers an interpretation of the narrative events asserting that whether it’s Moses’ parents (11:29),

Rahab (11:31), David (11:32), or unnamed people suffering horrible persecution, death, and rejection (11:36-38), faith in God's promise is what marked God's people throughout the Mosaic era.

The author gives the promise a name: Christ. He says that Moses, "considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward" and that "he endured as seeing him who is invisible" (11:26-27). The author is not saying that Moses had a vision of Jesus of Nazareth or knowledge of exactly how God's promise would be fulfilled in him. The author's point is that Moses' suffering (and the suffering of those included later) was for the sake of God's promise which would be revealed only later in Jesus. Jesus *is* the promise so believing the promise is believing in Jesus the fulfillment. Jesus *is* the reward for which Moses looked. By faith, the promise is as good as the fulfillment. Every story of faith in the OT is a story of faith in Jesus in the form of God's word of promise.

An analogy may help. If you were asked "How was Abraham saved?" how would you answer? You might say, "By faith," and that would be correct. Abraham was saved by faith in God's promise. Jesus is that promise. So a legitimate answer would also be "Abraham was saved by believing in Jesus." It's just that he had that salvation in the form of promise. Similarly, the reproach Moses bore in Egypt was on account of his belief in God's promise as greater than anything Pharaoh and Egypt could offer. The reproach was for the promise, and the promise is Jesus. The blood of the Passover that Moses sprinkled on the door lintel (Exod 12:22; Heb 11:28), foreshadowed the blood of the great high priest (Heb 9:11-12). The author is doing what we are often hesitant to do, namely, assert that the entire OT narrative is comprehended *only* through God's full revelation of himself in Christ. Every person in the OT narrative that believes God, that perseveres in the face of persecution, that obeys God in spite of what is seen all around, is accepted by God through Christ.

Once again readers might notice what seems to be a discrepancy between Hebrews and the OT narrative. He asserts that Israel crossed the Red Sea by faith, but in Exodus when the people found themselves between the sea and an enraged Egyptian army we hear something a little different: "They said to Moses, 'Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?'" (Exod 14:11-12). They did, however, cross on dry ground as God promised and the Egyptians were destroyed. That the chapter is not really the "Heroes



of the Faith” is abundantly clear. The author is not unaware of their continual grumbling and rejection of Moses. He made a major point about Israel’s failure to believe earlier in the letter (3:16-19), even asserting that it was the people who left Egypt who rebelled. The point about the Red Sea story is that only through faith can a gigantic group of people walked between two walls of water and cross to the other side. He is not making a point about Israel’s perfect track record. The “Heroes” theme just won’t work unless we cherry pick our favorites and ignore their less than perfect records (e.g., David). The only true hero here, as throughout the chapter, is God who keeps his promises. This is what will keep his audience from falling back from Jesus.

The best, or worst, example of how the “*Heroes*” approach doesn’t do justice to the chapter is Samson. There have been all sorts of answers given to justify Samson’s inclusion (11:32). There’s really nothing to be gained from reviewing them. On the whole, Samson, though the toughest man in the Bible, blatantly disregarded the covenant, was disobedient to his parents, was boastful, and a liar. In my view, the best we can say is that Samson is included because his last recorded act, reduced by that time to a blind court jester, was crying out to God and bringing down the house on over three-thousand Philistines, killing himself in the process (Judg 16:28-30). Even then, however, his motive is less than pious. He wanted revenge on the Philistines for gouging out his eyes (Judg 16:28). I’m not saying I would have meditated blissfully, wishing nothing but the best for the people who cut out my eyes, but even at his “best” Samson seems at least double-minded. Hebrews, however, doesn’t dissect Samson’s life or motives, he simply lists him among others like the prophets who, by faith, performed miraculous feats against God’s enemies. The theme here is not, “Be a Samson” or “Be a David (though not all the time) any more than it’s “What Would Israel Do?” The theme is that God kept his promise to make Abraham a great nation and to defeat Israel’s enemies. God kept his promise to faith. Hebrew’s interpretation read along with the OT narratives serve to take the attention off the characters and their all-too-relatable sins and imperfections, and cast it on the God who works through the faith of inconsistent and flawed people to fulfill his word of promise. If there are moral-exemplars, they are such not because they were exemplary moral people, but because they were people who put their faith in God.

The chapter ends with a positive call to faith. The result is a definitive answer to the original readers’ desire to look back on and hold on to a bygone

era. The faithful in that era, and going back in time immemorial, lived by faith, looking *forward* the fulfillment of the promise—the very time in which the audience lives. Rather than simply warn them of the mortal danger of falling back on the Mosaic covenant, the author points them to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of their faith (12:2).

Throughout the epistle, the author's way of diverting his reader's desire to fall back on the Mosaic covenant goes beyond telling them it is over and done with. What he does is show them their fundamental misunderstanding of how that covenant functioned in the first place. It was always pointing to something invisible, not of this world. Shadows and copies of something greater. The astonishing thing is that the invisible became visible and entered this world. Jesus is heavenly reality in the flesh. In him everything known about God from creation through covenant, is fulfilled in him. The past-present-future dynamic of faith continues, but has been overhauled now that the invisible is revealed in Jesus. Whereas, in the past, when God's people lived by faith looking back on his word of promise that guaranteed the future, now believers *rest by faith* in the fulfillment of the promise of forgiveness, righteousness, and reconciliation which guarantees the future. God's act in Jesus guarantees his future and, so, believers live by faith in Jesus in the present.

### **Conclusion: *Worthy to God***

The "Heroes" and "Hall of Fame" perspectives on chapter 11 have a way of abstracting the chapter from Hebrews. Far worse, however, is the tendency the "Heroes" view has to turn the chapter on faith to a chapter on "do this and live." If the application in preaching or teaching is "You need to be like Enoch then God will reward you" (since we'll never choose Samson) then the hearers are left with simply another thing he or she must *do* if there's any hope of pleasing God. Such guilt and law-based preaching will only, ever, result in hopelessness. If people can only dredge up enough faith then God will reward them. Reward them with what? Crowns or whatever other "heavenly rewards" we pull out of context to make heaven a carrot on a stick, something we work toward rather than something we have by faith in the fulfilled work of Christ, the great and final high priest who gave his own blood for our forgiveness and in whom we have entered God's rest? The reward, the inheritance, of faith is the promise—Jesus is the reward, and we have him by faith! While we should take

stock of our own faith living as we do on this side of the promise in comparison to the countless believers who died while keeping faith in God even though the promise was never realized in their time, they should inspire rather than leave us with yet more guilt and despair.

In faith, we are always aware that we do not have enough. In faith we are always, and painfully, conscious that we don't measure up. That is precisely the point. If we had enough faith (whatever that means); if we have arrived at perfect-never-a-hint-of-doubt faith; if our faith measured up then there would be no need for faith. If, however, we can grasp that faith never rests content in itself, never feels self-assured, never feels perfect, then we may be on the road to true faith. Faith does not pay attention to itself but is fixed on the one who is eternal, who always keeps his promises, and who declares full and perfect forgiveness in the sacrifice of Jesus.

We are not so different than the original audience. The substance is likely different, but we are nevertheless drawn to what we can see, point to, and take comfort in. We are bombarded by temptation and by the world, all of which sets itself up as an alternative to what God speaks in Christ. The visible constantly struggles against the invisible. The good news is this: it is not the perfection of our faith that makes us perfect, but the one who perfects our faith, that is, Jesus the object, end goal, and perfecter of our faith. In him, and by faith alone, God commends and approves us.

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are taken from, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2016.
  2. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation; Nashville: B&H, 2015), 338–39.
  3. See, for instance, the article by Ardel Caneday in this issue of SBJT.