

We're in Hebrews 11, which is that well-known magnificent chapter on "faith".

It lists out all of the heroes of the Old Testament, and the faith that they had; and the great things that God did through them, because of their faith...

But the main point isn't "faith". The main point, is that we have something better in store. It's much better than anything this life has to offer.

We:

- have a better:
 - country
 - homeland
 - destination
 - city

And we:

- rise to a better life

It is the promise of God, that we cannot yet see, but by faith, we believe it; we know it; and we live in a way that gives evidence to what we believe.

So, last week, we looked at the big picture of Chapter 11. This week, we're going to begin to focus on some of the specific examples of faith.

When I was a student at Ag College, and we were learning how to class sheep/wool, the sheep and wool man (deputy principle), told us that if we ever found ourselves judging an event, and a child put an entry into the event (competing

against the adults), make sure the child gets a prize of some kind.

And when he said that, I thought back over all of the times (that as a child) I'd put something into the show, and received a "Highly Commended" ribbon.

Not good enough to get a prize, but "good effort" little fella.

The first truth we learn today, is about "commendation" (stamp of approval). V2: By faith, the people of old received their commendation.

Alright their faith, was a good thing. God commended them **because** of their faith, and they were known **because** of their faith... And their stories are printed in the pages of our bibles, **because** of their faith.

But it's not until we get to V39, that we discover, that even though they were commended for their faith, they hadn't yet received the prize. And the promise, is that we, together **with** them, **will** be made perfect.

In:

- a better:
 - country
 - homeland
 - destination
 - city

When we, **together** with them:

- rise to a better life

But even though we haven't gotten to the prize yet, "commendation" is important, because commendation means

we're on track, to get the prize. As the People of God, we long to please God. And we please God by "faith".

So, the first example given is Cane and Abel. Cane was **not** commended. Abel **was** commended...

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.

It's an event that happened in Genesis 4. Cain was the eldest son of Adam and Eve – the first child to ever be born of a woman. And he grew up to become the world's first murderer... The human race isn't off to a very good start, is it. The first born, becomes the first murderer.

Here's the story:

Cain was a sod-buster. Abel was a stocky.

For the city folk who are listening in, that means Cain was an agriculturalist – a farmer, who grew crops. And Abel raised livestock – he kept sheep.

And so, they both brought their offerings to God. Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground (presumably some of the grain he'd produced). Whereas Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions...

Genesis 4: (ESV) ⁴ ...And YHWH had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

Now, over the years, there's been a lot of ink spilled over what's going on here.

- Why did God accept Abel and his sacrifice, and not Cain's?
- Is it because God loves stockies and not sod-busters?
- Is it because God only likes meat, and He's not into the vegies?
- Is it because Cain just brought a sample of what he had grown, while Abel brought the firstborn of his flock and the fat portions (the best bits)???

Well, that could possibly have something to do with it...

But the key, **isn't** the sacrifice itself. It's the heart of the one **making** the sacrifice.

⁶ YHWH said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted?

You see, it wasn't about the sacrifice itself. It was about the person. Abel was righteous. Cane was not.

And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

You see, “sin” is bad for a person. “Sin” desires something that is bad for you, and it’s all about the state of the heart... Sin may feel good at the moment, but its result, is destruction.

Even as Cain made this offering to God, inside him, he had the heart of bitterness – a wicked heart – a heart that would murder his brother over jealousy.

And that comes out here in Hebrews. It wasn’t about the gift. It was about the **giver**. God commended Abel, by accepting his gift. It wasn’t a commendation of the gift. It was a commendation of the person.

Anyway, Cain hated his brother, and murdered him... And so we have here, a tragedy. The goodie gets killed, while the baddy lives. But Hebrews says of Abel, **And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.**

What does that mean? How can a dead person speak?

Well, we find the answer to that in **Genesis 4:(ESV)**
¹⁰ **And YHWH said, (to Cain) “What have you done?
The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me
from the ground.**

Abel died, but he still speaks. His blood, is crying out to God from the ground... It’s a cry for justice/vengeance. It’s a cry that God hears... And God will act upon it.

In the book of Revelation, we’re given an image of the souls of those who have been killed for proclaiming the Word of God and for preaching the Good News. They’re tucked away safely under the altar in Heaven, and **Revelation 6: (ESV) ¹⁰ They**

cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

The Day of The Lord is coming. And on that day, the faithful who have died, will be raised to life, and the wicked shall be judged...

But there's a bit of a problem here (for you and me). If the Lord only receives the offering of those whose hearts are not evil, how can the likes of you and me, be commended by God?

The same way as Abel (by faith).

We're getting a bit ahead of ourselves at this point, but when we get to our next chapter (12), we're going to hear more about Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant and how His blood **speaks a better word than the blood of Abel**.

Alright, so if the blood of Abel represents the cry for justice/vengeance for all of the evil that's been done in the world, that means it represents the punishment **I** deserve for **my** sins. But, the blood of Jesus, is the atoning sacrifice, by which our sins are forgiven. The blood of Jesus, can even forgive the sins of a murderer.

And so, by faith, we are forgiven of our sins, and we (like Abel) become **commendable** in the sight of God. Wow...

Next, we come to the faith of Enoch. We don't hear much about Enoch in the Bible. It seems that Enoch didn't die. He

was commended by God – he was a man of faith. And there is no record of his death. He was just taken by God.

And this is a reminder to us, that when Jesus returns, it isn't only the faithful who have died, who will be resurrected. The faithful who are still living, will (like Enoch) be taken up to be joined together, with those who are raised.

And then there was Noah.

Genesis 6:(ESV)⁹ Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

What a testimony. How would you like that to be written on your tombstone? “Michael walked with God”...

But in God's sight, the Earth had become corrupt (filled with violence). And God said to Noah, **I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them.**

And he gave Noah instructions on how to build an ark. And this thing was massive. It would have taken him decades to build it. And Noah, acted in faith. For decades, he worked on building the ark, that would save him and his family...

Can you imagine how many life opportunities came up and passed him by, as he continued work on the ark?

- The business opportunities that would've gone by;
- the amount of money he must have spent on it;

...

And V7, makes a very confronting statement, and it's something for us to learn from: **By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.**

Now, most of us will be quite happy to become heirs of righteousness, but we mightn't be so happy about "condemning the world".

I want us to consider,

Why is it, that when a Christian lives in the righteousness of God;

when we:

- live by faith;
- live for the life that is to come
(rather than living for this life);
- refuse to engage in the evil that those around us engage in;
- don't:
 - get drunk;
 - swear;
 - gossip;
 - chase after the things of this world;
 - sleep around.
- do:
 - go to church;
 - worship God;
 - put others first;
 - honour God with every part of our being...

Why is it, that the ungodly are offended by the way we live???

I'll tell you why.

- Light, reveals darkness.
- Righteousness shows up sinfulness.
- Faithfulness reveals faithlessness.
- And to live as an heir of righteousness – to genuinely embrace the way of Jesus, is a confronting reminder to the **un**righteous, of the Day of Judgment..

You see, as Christians, we don't **need** to poke the finger at everyone and say, "Oh, look at you lot – you're going to go to hell"...

Your faith, and the life choices you make (because of your faith) is telling them that already. And that is why Christianity is so offensive. It reveals to a person, that they are a sinner in need of a saviour (because I'm a sinner in need of a Saviour).

What we **do** (how we **behave**), reveals to the world, what we really believe.

Next, we come to Abraham. Abraham, was a man of faith. How did Abraham demonstrate his faith? By obedience.

God said to Abraham:

- Leave the land where you live;
- Leave your family home;
- Leave your parents and your extended family; and
- go to the place that I will show you.

That's a pretty big ask. He didn't even know where he was going.

Genesis 12: (ESV) ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

You see, even there, we're seeing a hint of the blessing that would come from Abraham and his descendants (a blessing that would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ)...

BTW, Abraham was 75 years old when he got the call. And he upped and left. At that point, he was childless, but he heads off in faith, believing that he would become a nation, with a multitude of descendants.

And at 75 years old, he left his father's **house**, to go and live in a tent, on his way to he didn't know where.

And Abraham's journey of faith, became an inter-generational journey of faith. His son (Isaac), and his grandson (Jacob), were living on an inherited promise. Yes, they lived in, and journeyed through, what would become the promised land. But at that point, it wasn't theirs. They lived as foreigners/strangers/aliens.

And they continued to live in their tents (just passing through).

Anyway, by faith, the seemingly impossible happened. Abraham and Sarah became parents. Abraham was 100, and Sarah was 90... And it was through their son, Isaac, that the promise would come.

And the point of Hebrews, is that even though they were journeying through the land of Canaan (that which would **become** the promise land), (and what would **become** the land of Israel), - even that, is not the pinnacle of the promise.

V¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

God has designed, and is **building** something greater, and that's what he was looking forward to. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob desired a better country – a heavenly one.

And V16 says: Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Now, if you're anything like me, you probably not too enraptured about the prospect of living in a city. **Most** people who are listening to these messages either live on-the-land, or wished they could...

Why are we given an image of the life to come – this better thing, being a city?

I suspect there's two reasons. Firstly, it will be a place of fellowship – you won't be alone – we will be a part of a community.

But the main reason, is it's a picture of safety and security.

You see, we might think of a city as a den of iniquity and a place where criminal gangs leave blood in the streets. But to understand this, we've got to take ourselves back to ancient times. We've got to take ourselves back to a time when there was no law-&-order out in the wilderness.

And if you lived out on the land, you were easy pickings for any outlaw, or marauding army that passed through. That's why Abraham had 318 of his own trainedⁱ soldiers on staff.

And so, for the ancients, a city, was a picture of safety. It was protected by a wall; It was protected by its army... (Safety in numbers). And when an enemy approached, those who were out on the land, would flee to the protection afforded by the walls of the city.

And that's why the eternal promise we look forward to, is referred to as a heavenly city. It's an image of safety and security. It's a place where evil cannot get you.

But while I might struggle with the "city" image, this bit I love.

they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for he has prepared for them a city.

Sometimes, because of my sin, I feel dreadfully ashamed before God. With the flood of Noah, God was sad that He'd made man in the first place... And when I do evil, God must be ashamed of me, right???

Well, when we turn to Him in faith, and we set our hearts on eternity, and live for the life to come, God is not ashamed to be called your God, because the eternal city is exactly what He has prepared for us.

Now, for Abraham, it wasn't all beer & skittles. In his faith, he was tested.

And in Genesis, there's this heart-wrenching story of when God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son, Isaac...

God told Abraham, to give up the one thing that was most precious to him... Now, we know God better. God hates human sacrifice. He hates the killing of babies. But Abraham lived in an era when people all around him (who worshipped other gods) did it, and so he set out to obey God...

What was his motivation? Obedience – faithful obedience.

In vv18 & 19, we get a little glimpse into the thought-pattern of Abraham.

The promise of God, was that his vast number of future descendants, would come through this little boy Isaac. Therefore, God is able to raise Isaac from the dead.

But of course, when God saw that Abraham was faithful, and wouldn't even hold back his only son, He said "Stop, Abraham",,, and there, nearby, caught in the bushes, was a sheep for the sacrifice...

That would've been a painful, traumatic time for Abraham (and for Isaac). But by faith, they discovered that God is the one who provides...

And countless generations of Disciples of Jesus, have been tested in **their** faith. There's probably been times when you've been tested in **your** faith. God may have told you to give up that thing which is most valuable to you,,, and through obedience, and through faith, you've discovered that God is the one who provides for you...

And the faith of Abraham, went down through the generations.

- Isaac looked to the future, when he blessed his sons (Jacob & Esau)
- When Jacob was dying, he passed the blessing on to the sons of Joseph.
- And when Joseph was dying, he looked forward to the Exodus – a time when the people of Israel would **exit** Egypt, and enter the promised land.
And he gave instructions, "When you lot leave Egypt, take my bones with you."

The point, is all of these, were looking forward to the promise.

That, is the way of faith. We are strangers. “Sojourners” is the world (We’re just passing through).

And for us, this is a very real act of faith.

Because

- we are sojourners;
 - we are passing through;
 - this is not our permanent home,
- we live now, for what is to come.

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You,
that it is by faith, that we are saved.

And we thank You,
that this life is not the pinnacle of our promise.
We pass through this,
to that which is to come,
when we will be with You,
in Glory.

Lord, we pray for Your Kingdom to come.
We pray for Jesus to return,
but we also pray for Your Kingdom to come,

in us, now.

Lord, give us the faith,
to live-out what we really believe.
A faith, to live in a manner worthy of our calling.
A faith, to become heirs of righteousness,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 14:14