



## 27: Faith Is...

The writer could well go straight from chapter 10 verse 39 to his exhortation, "Therefore let us run with patience the race that is set before us" at the start of chapter 12, but he doesn't. Instead he digs back into the Old Testament and pulls out story after story of men and women who have lived by faith: people like Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel. All of them heroes of the Old Testament. All of them people who were approved of by God. All of them people who were commended by God for their faith. Men and women who had nothing but promises from God to keep them going. Men and women who had no tangible evidence that those promises would ever be fulfilled and yet they set their course by them and persevered.

- ◆ *Why do you think the writer cites so many stories from the Old Testament?*

But first he tells us two things about faith:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible."

Hebrews 11:1 – 3

Many make the mistake of seeing Hebrews 11:1 as the Bible's definition of faith but it's important to realise that whilst it tells us two important things about faith it's not a complete description. Just like every other verse in the Bible this one too must be read in context and understood in light of what was the writer's intention and purpose when he wrote it as well as in light of what's said elsewhere in the Bible.

### Faith Makes Your Hopes Real

The first of the two things we're told about faith is that it's "the substance of things hoped for." The word translated substance is only used in four other places in the New Testament (Hebrews 1:3, 3:14, 2 Corinthians 9:4, 11:17). It has been translated in different ways. For example:

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for."

New American Standard Bible

"Faith gives substance to our hopes"

New English Bible

"Faith is a confident assurance of that for which we hope."  
The Weymouth Translation

There are other different translations that could be listed and you might find it a useful exercise to compare as many of them as you can get your hands on, for all of them are correct but none of them on its own gives the full meaning.

- ◆ *Explain the meaning of the phrase "Faith is the substance of things hoped for," in your own words.*

#### Faith Is Evidence

The second thing we're told about faith is that it's "the evidence of things we cannot see." Faith is what convinces us that things we can't see are real.

- ◆ *Why do you think the writer chooses to highlight these two aspects of faith at this point in his book?*

#### What Hopes? What Things?

But what are the hopes that are made real by faith? What are the unseen things that faith is evidence for? Surely the writer doesn't mean that any hope we're capable of dreaming up can become real or that any unseen thing we're capable of imagining actually exists, does he?

This is where the present context and the teaching of the rest of Scripture become so important. The "things hoped for" and the "things not seen" that the writer has in mind have to be things we hope for because of promises God has made and things we can't see that God has told us about in His word.

- ◆ *If you were to take Hebrews 11:1 as a stand-alone definition of faith what wrong conclusions might you come to?*
- ◆ *What's missing from Hebrews 11:1 as a definition of faith?*

#### More About Faith

Verse 2 leads us into those stories that will fill the rest of the chapter. With the use of the word for, it tells us they're going to prove that verse 1 is true. But the stories will also add to our understanding of what faith is. We're going to see that faith recognises God's power; faith wins God's approval; faith leads to courageous, sacrificial, persistent obedience and dependence on God; people of faith live for the future and are content to let the attractions of the present pass them by; faith can determine our choices, conquer our fears, sharpen our vision and encourage us to be adventurous.

- ◆ *Where do you see these aspects of faith illustrated in Hebrews 11?*
- ◆ *What else does this chapter teach you about faith?*

However, before he kicks off with the story of Abel the writer takes us right back to the very beginning to illustrate what he's just said.

- ◆ *In what way does verse 3 help your understanding of verse 1?*

#### Better Things To Come

Skipping to the end of the chapter, the writer concludes:

"All these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us."

Hebrews 11:39 – 40

Some see the better thing referred to here as blessings that are ours since the coming of Jesus: blessings the saints of Old Testament times didn't know. But it makes more sense and fits the context better to say it is simply all the future blessing God has promised us all. The Old Testament saints died without receiving the blessing they were promised: they still have it coming. They will be perfected and so will we along with them when the time of fulfilment comes. The promised blessing is full salvation: a perfect, new, sinless body and a place in God's perfect eternal kingdom. That, ultimately, is the hope of which, by faith, we are confidently assured. That, ultimately, is the unseen thing of which faith is the evidence.