

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel ... Enoch ... Noah ... Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob ... David and Samuel and the prophets ...

Introduction

We have worked our way through Hebrews 11, which is a huge encouragement to faith that reinforces the exhortation of 10.35-39. Look there with me as I read the text: ³⁵ **Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.** ³⁶ **For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.** ³⁷ **For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay;** ³⁸ **but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."** ³⁹ **But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.** Clearly, the writer considers his readers, for the most part, to be people of faith (10.39, **we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls**). However, addressing them as the baptized church (6.1-4), he knows that there may be some who profess a faith that they do not possess (4.1). By contrast, those who have faith manifest it by endurance in doing the will of God. To encourage endurance in the obedience of faith, the writer blasts away in chapter 11 with a multi-fold encouragement to faith. Thus, he lists examples from the OT beginning with the book of Genesis and sweeping across the entire spectrum of redemptive history.

Today, I want to review this multi-fold encouragement to faith, but how can we cover the large amount of material of this chapter? It is large with challenge, even as a brief sketch. Here is a suggestion: first, we can walk through the text, engaging the text together to come up with a sketch of the author's sketch; second, we can fill in the sketch, color it in with applications.

1A. Making a sketch of a sketch

The author gives only a snippet of OT history in these verses, but enough to verge on losing the brevity he intends for this letter (11.32; 13.22). So, as we review the chapter, let us try to work our way into a summary of his summary or a sketch of his sketch.

Our sketch will be rough and ready. We have to say "rough and ready" because these sections are not explicitly marked and without question the author is not precisely chronological. Some names are not listed as they appear historically, though most do. Moreover, the events of the last section refer to incidents scattered across most of the other sections.

Now to imbed the text into our hearts as our meditative goal, we need to stand back and look at the shape of the object before us, we need to concentrate on the pattern. This is like a map of the State of Michigan. We notice the mitten with a thumb and the lakes that surround the Lower Peninsula; these things give us borders that serve as hooks for a closer look. Okay, so what are the borders of a piece of writing, its shape or pattern? A common pattern, say, to a written sermon is to have an introduction, body and conclusion. We can illustrate these three elements of shape by comparing them with a house with many rooms. The introduction is like the front porch, the body is parallel to the rooms, and the conclusion is like the back porch. When I introduce a sermon, I bring you to the front porch and tell you that we are going to enter this house with x number of rooms. In the body of the sermon, I take you from room to room. Then we exit by the back porch and reflect on the impact of seeing those rooms.

Now, where are the front porch and the back porch of Hebrews 11? What are some clues that hint in this direction? I will wait on you for some answers and then move on: what indicates that the introduction is 11.1-3? At the least, we can observe the general flavor of things with no specific examples: **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.** ² **For by it the people of old received their commendation.** ³ **By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.** The examples then begin with Abel and

continue one after another throughout the chapter. What is the catch phrase throughout the chapter that connects this porch with this house? The catch phrase of course is "**by faith.**"

Turn to the end of the chapter. What part looks like a back porch? As I answer this question and read the verses, consider what it is about this section that makes it a fitting back porch on which to stand and ponder the impact of our visit to this house: ³⁹ **And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,** ⁴⁰ **since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect** (11.39-40). We might ask some questions such as, "What is the scope of "all these"? How far back in the chapter does it take us? What indicates that the author sends us back in thought to Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and so forth? There is an evident contrast between us and all these. So how big is that contrast? If "us" refers to NT saints, then what does that suggest about "all these." It obviously refers to OT saints. Do you see how verses 39-40 fit as a back porch? Where else in this entire chapter is there any reference to the readers? There is no other reference to the readers. All attention is on the people he cited in his introduction: **the people of old** (11.2). Thus, it is easy to take "all these" back to Abel.

We now have the outside borders of the text: the introduction is 1-3 and the conclusion is 39-40. We have the front porch and back porch, but what about the rooms? The author does not tell us in his introduction that there are x number of rooms. Trying to identify a limited number of rooms is a rough and ready project; it is to help us get our arms around the entire chapter in a simple way that aids the memory. This is part of our sketch of the author's sketch. This is part of our meditations on the text as we seek to itch it deep into our souls. At first, it may seem like a daunting task. We may be quickly overwhelmed by the sheer number of characters and events.

It is helpful in this regard to remember that example is tied to history. We can limit the number of rooms if we can identify major periods in the history of the OT. Before we try to outline the body of the passage, we will do well to mark out some major events in very broad terms. Then we can try to connect the characters with the events. Let me give the broadest structure: we can talk about the early beginnings on one hand and the end of the OT on the other. So, from early beginnings (as Abel, Enoch) to the end of the OT (with the prophets looking ahead to the NT) what are some major OT events? Some help in answering this question is to think of major events as those that affect the rest of human history, highlight redemption, and speak of God's judgment; these may overlap. What are some events like this that come immediately to mind? Think ahead of me, as I walk my way into an answer. We already talked about early beginnings, but when you sweep across the OT, do you not move in thought from creation to the fall? Of course, our text begins after Adam; he is not mentioned. If the fall brings up the thought of judgment, what is the next major event? The next major event is the flood, which we associate with Noah; he is cited by the writer to the Hebrews. Turning from judgment to redemption, the call of what significant person is paramount in the OT? Redemptive promise stands out in a huge way in the call of Abraham. What, then, is the next major redemptive event in the family history of Abraham as it grew into a nation? That, of course, would be the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. As far as our text in Hebrews is concerned, the next major event following the exodus is what? After wandering for forty years, the nation of Israel entered Canaan in conquest under Joshua.

Now we have some shape to the body of this text. The key points of reference for people and events that fit within the big outline of early beginning to the end of the OT are the Flood, the call of Abraham, the Exodus, and the conquest of Canaan. If we use these four events as an overlay and place it over the examples of Hebrews 11, we come up with four points to the body of this text or four rooms to the house.

How would you interface these major events with the examples to come up with a fourfold pattern? If you start with the phrase "early beginnings to", with what would you end the first section? No doubt you would end with the Flood and thus with Noah: in 11.4-7, we have the early beginnings to Noah. In verse 8, the next major character is clearly Abraham: **By faith Abraham.** He is mentioned again in verse 17. Then the text discusses his son, Isaac, a grandson,

Jacob, and a great-grandson, Joseph. Where is Joseph most of his life, at the end of his life, and what leads to the next major redemptive event of the OT? He spent most of his life in Egypt and that is where he died, outside the land of promise. Thus, the second room of this house covers the time from Abraham to Joseph. The relevant verses are 8-22. Note verse 22: **By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.** Obviously, the third section covers Moses to the Exodus that Joseph anticipated (v.22); it extends from 23 to 29 (v. 23, **By faith Moses, when he was born;** v. 24, **By faith Moses, when he was grown up** v. 28-29, **By faith he kept the Passover and ...crossed the Red Sea**). Clearly, the rest of the chapter has to do with the conquest of Canaan through exile from the land and through return to the land to the end of the OT.

Therefore, we can discern four rooms in this house: the early beginnings room, the Abraham room, the Moses room, and the conquest room. The author takes us back to the people of old in four time periods. In the early beginnings room (4-7), we have Abel, Enoch, and Noah. In the Abraham room (8-22), we have Abraham, Sarah and their son (Isaac), grandson (Jacob), and great-grandson (Joseph). In the Moses room (23-29), we find Moses and his parents. Finally, in the conquest room (30-38), we have names without biography, a single category, the prophets, and events without names.

By this exercise in meditation on the text, we arrive at the following simple sketch of the author's own sketch: introduction, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the conquest, and conclusion.

Introduction regarding faith, 1-3

Early beginnings to Noah, 4-7 (Abel, Enoch, Noah)

Abraham to Joseph, 8-22 (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph)

Moses to the Exodus, 23-29 (Moses and his parents)

Conquest to the end of the OT, 30-38 (Names, no biography, events, no names)

Conclusion, 39-40

It is beneficial to meditate on the Scriptures by reviewing the parts to see how they fit into the whole and to see how they work together as a whole. For some of this wholeness we now turn to our second main point: coloring or filling in the parts of the sketch; this brings them closer together.

2A. Coloring in parts of the sketch

To do this, to fill in parts of the sketch in review and for our edification, one way to proceed is to view the four rooms through the glass door on the back porch. For us today, this means that we will cover two things: perspective from the author's conclusion and lessons. This may be a sketch but the lines can be clear and the lessons profitable. Hopefully, this will open the door for you to make many applications on your own.

1B. Perspective from the author's conclusion

The conclusion makes it clear how these examples are relevant for us. He tells us that the salvation of the saints of old is bound up with our salvation. Even though they shine as outstanding examples of faith, we have a better salvation and their salvation could not be complete without us: **God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect (11.40)**

Thus, one way to view the examples of the chapter is in a large *a fortiori* argument that moves from the lesser (the shadows of promise) to the greater (the realities of fulfillment). The encouragement to faith is essentially this: if they trusted the Lord having the promises dimly lit in the shadows of anticipation, how much more ought you to trust the Lord having the promises brightly illuminated in the noonday sun of accomplishment.

Moreover, the encouragement to faith is an encouragement to the obedience of faith; that is part of the nature of faith. Thus, the encouragement comes to us in the following way: if the blessings of the saints of the old covenant in the time of shadows were so rich, full, and marvelous, then consider the greater richness, fullness, and marvel of your blessings as saints of

the new covenant. Conclusion: then, embrace the covenant keeping Lord and follow Him in pursuit of even greater obedience.

2B. Lessons

1) Walk around on this earth like Abel, Enoch, and Noah . . . *with* God. Converse much with God and listen carefully to what He is saying in the creation and especially in Scripture.

2) Keep your eyes on the promises of God like Abraham did, not knowing where God would take him from place to place on this earth, waiting patiently with endurance over many years, and giving up his son in obedience, but receiving him back as a symbol of the death and resurrection of the coming seed promised to Eve and Abraham. This is the one who will bless all families of the earth giving them restoration from all the effects of the fall.

They saw the promised city from afar (11.13-16). Having seen the promises from afar they embraced them. So now what can you say? You are a child of the new covenant; the promises of the gospel are near, your Lord is near. Drink much from the well of promise to thereby keep your eyes heaven-ward. Taste now of those things yet to come that you have as your possession already. Taste of the Lord in this way, know that He is good, and gain a spring in your step as you make your pilgrim journey from this moment to eternal glory and final Sabbath rest.

3) Keep your eye fixed on the one who promised as exemplified by Sarah. What a great focus: **she considered him faithful who had promised** (11.11). This is not an exclusion of the promises. It simply cuts through all the promises to the Lord of the covenant, to Him, to the Lord God almighty, maker of heaven and earth. This is personal; it just says, "Walk with Him embracing His promises." You have this privilege with greater access to the heavenly temple; you have a better walk with God because of accomplished redemption; so keep your eye on Him in prayer and song, in worship and praise.

4) Pursue obedience to your Lord. Repeatedly, we read here of the obedience of faith: **By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.** ⁸ **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going** (11.7-8). Listen to the commands and warnings of your high priest and heed them.

5) Choose the Lord and His people above all earthly things, as Moses did: ²⁴ **By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,** ²⁵ **choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.** ²⁶ **He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward** (11.24-26). Christ was His reward; to be with Him in the heavenly Canaan, but this is significant, with Him means with His people. This is another way to view the importance of the church now on the way, as joint-heirs and pilgrims.

6) Trust in the Lord's loving providence through or around suffering, through some and around other sufferings according to His sovereign purpose. As He accomplishes His will in history, some escaped the edge of the sword; others died by the sword; these are not opposed one to the other. Abel died a violent death while God spared Enoch from death altogether. But most importantly, *they both lived by faith and by faith they both transcended death*. Faith is the victory. Consider how God works all for good for them that love Him and keep His commandments, for them that live before Him in the obedience of faith. Entrust yourself to Him who promised, rest in His love. This is the way to preserve your soul; this is the way of the Lord, this is the way of marvelous blessings, so walk you in it.

Therefore, take heart and be of good courage. The saints of old suffered and endured by faith in the promises anticipated. You have the promises accomplished in Christ. Trust and obey; there is no other way to walk with God as a pilgrim bound for the Promised Land.

To the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be all glory, now and forevermore, amen