
Faith Bible Study

Hebrews 11:1-16. 4 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

Hebrews 11:1 says "faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the certainty of what we do not see." In the Bible faith is trust in God and in what he has promised, strong enough to act on. Hebrews shows it in people like Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. Paul says we are made right with God through faith, not by our own works (Romans 4). James adds that real faith always shows itself in what we do (James 2).

READ TOGETHER: HEBREWS 11:1-16

¹ Now faith is the assurance of what we hope for and the certainty of what we do not see. ² This is why the ancients were commended. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ⁴ By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous when God gave approval to his gifts. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he did not see death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who approaches Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. ⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in godly fear built an ark to save his family. By faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. ⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, without knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he dwelt in the promised land as a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah, even though she was barren and beyond the proper age, was enabled to conceive a child, because she considered Him faithful who had promised. ¹² And so from one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³ All these people died in faith, without having received the things they were promised. However, they saw them and welcomed them from afar. And they acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ Now those who say such things show that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Who Hebrews was written to

Hebrews was written to Christians under pressure. Tyndale's study notes say "some in the Christian community were evidently struggling to maintain their commitment as they were being persecuted." They had stood firm before (10:32-34), but some were drifting, and some had walked away.

Chapter 10 ends with a call to endure and a quotation from Habakkuk: "My righteous one will live by faith" (10:38). Chapter 11 then shows what that looks like. Tyndale's notes describe the book as a sermon that calls its readers "to persevere in following Christ."

Faith looks forward

Hebrews 11 is about faith that trusts God for what has not happened yet. Noah builds an ark before any rain. Abraham leaves home without knowing where he is going. Sarah trusts God for a child long after it was possible. Verse 13 says they "died in faith, without having received the things they were promised."

The list runs on past verse 16 to Moses, Rahab and many unnamed people, and it ends in chapter 12 with Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith".

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with endurance the race set out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Abraham, in Genesis, Paul and James

One verse from Genesis sits under this whole study. Paul quotes it in Romans 4 and James quotes it in James 2, and Hebrews tells Abraham's story in 11:8-12.

Abram believed the LORD, and it was credited to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Yet he did not waver through disbelief in the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God was able to do what He had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:20-22)

Paul and James on faith and works

James says a person "is justified by his deeds and not by faith alone" (2:24). Paul says God credits righteousness to the one "who does not work, but believes" (Romans 4:5). Read side by side, they can sound opposed. Most commentators read them as answering different problems.

Tyndale's notes on James put it this way: "Both Paul and James believed that a person must respond to God's offer of salvation by faith. But they differed in their emphasis." Paul was arguing against people who said Gentiles had to keep the law of Moses to belong to God. James was writing against a faith that is only words. In the notes' words, "James demonstrates that faith cannot be reduced to a mere affirmation of truth (2:19)."

So too, faith by itself, if it does not result in action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. (James 2:17-18)

You see that his faith was working with his actions, and his faith was perfected by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called a friend of God. As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and not by faith alone. (James 2:22-24)

THE HEROES OF FAITH IN HEBREWS 11:1-16

Each one begins with "by faith". None of them is perfect, and Genesis tells their failures too. What they share is that they took God at his word.

We who believe (11:3)

Before any hero, the writer starts with us. "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command." Faith is not only for great moments. It shapes how believers see the world itself, as something God spoke into being.

Abel (11:4)

Genesis 4 does not say exactly why God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's. Hebrews says the difference was faith. Abel was killed by his brother, yet "by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead."

Enoch (11:5-6)

Genesis 5:24 says Enoch "walked with God" and then was gone. Hebrews draws a principle from him: without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Noah (11:7)

Noah was warned "about things not yet seen" and built anyway. His faith was visible in timber and years of work. Hebrews says he "became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith".

Abraham (11:8-10)

Abraham obeyed and went "without knowing where he was going". Even in the promised land he lived in tents like a foreigner. Hebrews says he was looking past the land to "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God".

Sarah (11:11-12)

Genesis 18:12 records that Sarah laughed when she heard the promise. Hebrews still names her faith: "she considered Him faithful who had promised." Her faith rested on God's faithfulness, not on how strong she felt. Some translations read verse 11 as about Abraham's faith instead, because the Greek is hard.

All these died in faith (11:13-16)

The writer stops to say that none of them received everything they were promised in their lifetime. They saw it from far off and called themselves strangers and exiles. They were longing for a heavenly country, and "God is not ashamed to be called their God."

SESSION 1 OF 4

What faith is

Read Hebrews 11:1-7. See how Hebrews describes faith, and what it looked like in Abel, Enoch and Noah.

Also read: Hebrews 10:32-39; Genesis 4:1-10; Genesis 6:9-22.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Hebrews 11:1 pairs faith with two things. What are they?
2. For Abel, Enoch and Noah, what did each one do "by faith"?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Read Hebrews 10:32-39. What were the first readers going through, and why would chapter 11 help them?
4. Verse 6 says faith believes that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Why are both needed?
5. Is faith in Hebrews 11 a feeling of certainty, or trust that acts? Use Noah to answer.

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What has God promised that you find hardest to trust right now?
7. Noah acted on a warning long before he saw it come true. What is one step of obedience you have been putting off?

SESSION 2 OF 4

Strangers looking for a city

Read Hebrews 11:8-16. See how Abraham and Sarah lived by promises they did not see fulfilled. Also read: Genesis 12:1-4; Genesis 18:9-15; 1 Peter 2:11.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Find every verb Hebrews uses for Abraham in verses 8 to 10. What did he do?
2. What did all these people not receive, according to verse 13?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Read Genesis 18:9-15. How do you put Sarah's laughter beside Hebrews 11:11?
4. Why would Abraham live in tents in the land God promised him? What was he looking for?
5. What does it mean that God "is not ashamed to be called their God" (11:16)?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where do you feel most like a stranger because you follow Christ?
7. What promise are you waiting on that you may not see fulfilled soon? How could the group pray for you?

SESSION 3 OF 4

Hoping against hope

Read Romans 4:18-25. See how Paul uses Abraham to show that God counts faith as righteousness. Also read: Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:1-5; Genesis 17:15-17.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What did Abraham face honestly in verse 19? What did he not do in verse 20?
2. Who does Paul say the words "it was credited to him" were written for (4:23-24)?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Read Genesis 15:1-6. What did Abraham actually believe? What was credited to him?
4. Read Genesis 17:17, where Abraham laughs. How can Paul say he "did not waver"? What is Paul describing?
5. According to Romans 4:1-5, why does Paul insist this is not about working?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Do you ever think God accepts you because of how well you are doing? What does this passage say to that?
7. Abraham "gave glory to God" while he waited. What would that look like for you this week?

SESSION 4 OF 4

Faith that works

Read James 2:14-26. See what James means by dead faith, and how his words sit beside Paul's. Also read: Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:8-10; Joshua 2:8-14.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What example does James give in verses 15 and 16 of faith with no deeds?
2. Which two people does James use as examples? Which verse from Genesis does he quote?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Verse 19 says even demons believe that God is one. What kind of "faith" is James arguing against?
4. Read Ephesians 2:8-10. Where does Paul put good works in relation to salvation? How close is that to James?
5. Paul and James both quote Genesis 15:6. What is each one using it to show?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Is there someone in need whom you have only offered words to, like the person in verse 16?
7. Close by praying for each other, and choose one thing to do this week that puts your faith into action.

ONE-SESSION PATH

Faith in one evening

Read all of Hebrews 11:1-16. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Hebrews 11:1 pairs faith with two things. What are they?
2. List everyone named in 11:1-16. What did each one do "by faith"?
3. What did they all not receive, according to verse 13?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

4. Is faith in Hebrews 11 a feeling of certainty, or trust that acts? Use Noah or Abraham to answer.
5. Read Romans 4:20-22 and James 2:22-24. Both quote Genesis 15:6. What is each writer using it to show?
6. How can faith save without works, and yet never be without works?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

7. What promise of God do you find hardest to trust right now?
8. Close by praying for each other, and choose one thing to do this week that puts your faith into action.

FOR THE LEADER

- Read the passage aloud at the start of every session. In sessions 3 and 4 read the Romans or James passage too, since the page prints only Hebrews in full.
- Session 4 can turn into a debate. Let people say how their church puts it, then bring the group back to what Paul and James share: God saves by grace, faith is the response, and living faith shows itself in love.
- Do not let the heroes of faith become spiritual giants nobody can match. Genesis records Abraham lying about his wife and Sarah laughing at the promise. Faith in Hebrews 11 is trust in a faithful God, not a flawless record.
- Someone in your group may be struggling with doubt. Doubt is not the opposite of faith in Scripture. Point them to the man who said "I do believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24), and to verse 13, where people of faith died still waiting.
- Watch for the idea that enough faith guarantees health or wealth. Hebrews 11 itself goes on to people who were tortured and killed (11:35-38), and they are listed for their faith too.

- If someone shares something that needs more than a group discussion, follow up with them privately and involve your pastor.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

Do Paul and James disagree?

Most commentators read them as complementary. Paul argues that no one is made right with God by keeping the law, against those who would require it of Gentiles. James argues that a faith which never acts is not real faith. Both quote Genesis 15:6. Tyndale's notes on James sum it up: "True biblical faith will always produce good deeds pleasing to God." Paul says something close in Galatians 5:6: what matters is "faith, expressed through love."

What does James mean by "justified"?

James means that deeds show a person is already right with God: faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone. Some readers take justified in James 2 as God's verdict at the last judgment, where deeds are the evidence of faith. Either way, salvation starts with God's grace, and faith without deeds is dead.

Is Hebrews 11:1 a definition of faith?

It reads like one, but many readers see it as a description of what faith does rather than a full definition. The word translated "assurance" can mean confidence or the underlying reality of something. Some translations say "the substance of things hoped for". Either way, the chapter fills it out with people, not abstractions.

Does faith mean never doubting?

Paul says Abraham "did not waver through disbelief" (Romans 4:20), yet Genesis records him laughing at the promise (17:17). Most readers take Paul to be describing the overall direction of Abraham's life: he kept trusting God's promise. Scripture is full of believers who doubted and kept praying, and faith in the Bible rests on God's faithfulness more than on the strength of the believer's feelings.

SOURCES

Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Scripture text of Hebrews 11:1-16 and 12:1-2, Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:20-22 and James 2:17-18 and 2:22-24.

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