
The Persevering Grace of Looking Forward

Hebrews 11:4-16¹

All of us are tempted at times to quit, to give up believing in God in the midst of the temptations to sin or the testing and trials of suffering. Persevering in faith is one important piece of why we must magnify Christ and mature as saints. This persevering is sustained by coming to God, confessing our hope and caring for one another. From all this encouragement and exhortation comes the kind of faith that is the essence of what God has promised and a display of the excellence of the God who promises. At the center of a persevering faith is an unshakable conviction and confidence that God is real and a rewarder of all who keep on drawing near to Him. So we will trust and treasure Him all the way through to the end.

There are three basic ways of looking at life.

Looking backward – There is a way of living that primarily looks back at the past. There are some of you whose primary view of life is all about what has happened to you.

Looking around – There is a way of living that looks primarily at what we think of as the present. It is primarily focused on the immediate, the now.

Looking forward – There is a way of living that looks, not only forward, but actually sees beyond the death line and lives for the realities that are promised.

The last is the way of faith. Now let me say this. Living by looking forward profoundly affects the way you view your past and present. That is what this text is all about.

The Examples (v.4-12)

The best way to see how faith is the essence and evidence of future promises is in the lives of people. Abraham and Sarah are great examples of receiving the promises of God, believing in them and then longing for what God has promised. Their faith produced obedience in their lives and hope for their future.

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Faith's Presentation (v.4)

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. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

How is Abel's a better sacrifice? Why is it not the "perfect" or "correct" or "required" sacrifice? Why does our author say, "By faith Abel offered a *better, a more acceptable* sacrifice than Cain?" Yes, Abel offered a blood sacrifice. As far as we know, he brought what God required. Is that what Hebrews has in mind?

All through the Book of Hebrews, Jesus has been "the better". He has been the better revelation, the better sacrifice, the better high priest, the better sanctuary and administrator of the better covenant. And in this flow of thought, Abel offers a better sacrifice. He sacrifices a lamb and does so by faith – that is his offering of the lamb has in it the essence of his hope and is the evidence what is not seen.

When Abel brings his sacrifice, he knows for sure that what he is doing is pointing forward and higher to something to come later and is yet unseen. He does not expect this lamb he has brought to save, but he is utterly convinced with an unshakable assurance that God will send a Lamb. On that and with this lamb, he sets his hope.

Abel comes to worship God in God's way. He brings a sacrifice. He knows that he will only be accepted because of God's own provision of sacrifice. His faith and faith alone brings into his soul the affirming and commending testimony of God that he stands righteous in God's sight.

How is it that Abel still speaks? He speaks through the Word. We read his story in the Word. We believe it is true. We see the story line leading us to Jesus, the Lamb come to take away the sins of the world. We see Him crucified and resurrected. And it is real in our souls – so real we rest on and hope in that work alone for the saving of our souls. Genuine faith then conveys to our souls a sense of assurance and confidence that we are saved now and will be saved in the day of judgment. All because we have understood that the Word is still speaking – it is alive and thrumming with life changing power.

Faith's Pleasing (v.5-6)

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ⁶ 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.

By faith, Enoch pleased God. How did he please God? Genesis 6:21-24 says that Enoch walked with God. God publicly commended Enoch's pleasing walk by taking him out of the world, but not through death. Now again notice, by faith Enoch's walk with God had in it both the essence of pleasing God and the evidence that pleasing God is worthwhile. His walk with God had the fragrance of heaven and proved that God was real. It pleased God and delighted Him. So God rewarded Enoch's faith by taking him directly to paradise.

Imagine having the kind of communion and fellowship and walk with God that has in it here on earth the essence of heaven. How amazing it is to know, to having an unshakable assurance that we are living in such a way that it brings pleasure to God. When we live like this we show that pleasing God is better than pleasure and God puts His stamp of approval on it.

Is your life a walk with God that brings Him pleasure?

Faith's Preaching (v.7)

⁷ 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.

The faith of a believer affects him in his whole person.

Mind – He was warned. He heard God's Word.

Affections – He was moved with fear. What he heard moved him to really anticipate what was warned of.

Will – He built a boat.

Noah was warned about something he had never seen – a flood and possibly even, rain. He believed God about what he could not see and bowed in holy fear before the promises and the power of God and built a boat. Noah's obedient faith was a witness. Now we

know Noah preached and proclaimed and warned. But what he said was backed up by how he lived. He was utterly convinced that God was going to do what He said He would and had an unshakable assurance that this boat he was building was how God would deliver him and his family.

Now, we must not think of this as being the first boat. The Bible nowhere indicates that what he built was incomprehensible in its function. The ridicule and derision was heaped on him due to his preaching and warning of why the boat was necessary. Noah's obedience saved him and his family while leaving the world to be destroyed in condemnation.

Noah's boat building faith and world warning witness had in it the substance and essence of God's holy and soon coming wrath. It smelled of judgment waiting in the oven. It stood off the page of the chaos and evil around him as evidence that God existed and that all the world must answer to Him. What he did showed that he was an heir of righteousness.

Faith's Patience (v.8-10)

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. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

He Leaves by Faith (v.8)

The Word of God comes to Abraham, telling him to leave the land he is in and to travel to a destination that would be identified later. By faith, Abraham obeyed and went, going to what was promised not knowing where it was.

This is the kind of call every person who becomes a Christian receives. The Word of God (now located in the Scriptures, tells us to leave our sins, our security, our safety, our wealth, our pleasures and to begin a risky, dangerous, hard, and joyful journey to another land. It is a place we do not know where it is, what it really looks like and getting there will eventually require dying. But, it is the land where God is, where we will see and dwell with God, the land where all that He promises us will be. And so, by faith, we believe

and obey. We forsake houses and lands, if necessary family and friends and we head heavenward. And we patiently persevere and do not go back.

He Lives by Faith (v.9)

Abraham arrived and lived as a stranger and an alien in the very land he was promised. He witnessed to the temporary nature of living in the land by living in tents. After all, this was the promised land, but not yet. Do you see? Though he was an heir and owner, he was living in between the promise and the fulfillment. He lived it and so did his sons.

And so do we. We, like Abraham, are living in between the promise and fulfillment. This life we live now by faith, we live here constantly in transition, never really being settled down and at home. We, if you will, spiritually live in tents. We are sojourners, aliens, away from home. And we must pass this way of living on to our sons and daughters, to the next generation of believers.

He Looks by Faith (v.10)

What is it that drives this kind of living? Abraham lived his whole life, moving about in Israel, quietly marking off his heritage and the boundaries of his promise, *while his gaze was fixed on the city God designs and builds*. He lives with superb joy between the promise and the fulfillment because the eyes of his faith can see what God has promised and is still yet preparing. Because he is looking forward, he is neither distracted by the present nor tempted to return to what he has left.

Here is the lesson the author intends for us. Those whose faith leaves and lives with a strong sense of being a pilgrim will find the gaze of their souls fixed on their Redeemer and His heavenly reward. Because we are looking forward by faith to the fulfillment, we will persevere with grace enabled patience in the temptations to sin and the testing of suffering. What we have left we will not go back to. And what surrounds us now will not distract us. We will live now with our eyes set on Christ and our hearts fixed on heaven.

Faith's Power (v.11-12)

Now, faith has the element of perseverance towards a future and unseen goal. But that faith may also receive foretastes of those future realities. So, Sarah will bear a son who is the evidence of her faith and has in him the essence of the future Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Its Character (v.11)

Sarah's faith is grounded in the character of God. She heard a promise of her having a son. She carefully evaluated the faithfulness of God. She believed God and received the power to open her womb and bear a child. As is evident all through the Bible, the enabling power of God, that is, His grace, flows through faith to people.

What is being highlighted here is her consideration of the faithfulness of God. She studied and weighed the integrity of the God who made the promise (and yes, laughed at her own age and inability). But her belief was not just a fantasy wish, nor did it create the reality hoped for. It had content – you will bear a son. It had an object – a promising God who has integrity and is faithful. It weighed carefully the impossibility of her situation and the greatness of her God, then believing that God was real and rewarded, she got pregnant.

Its Consequence (v.12)

Here is the grand thing about this kind of faith – it may receive what is promised in the moment and it may bring an immeasurable result later. So through this faith in the faithful God who promised came first a son, Isaac and many sons. But greatest of all, came the Son of God who is the fulfillment of what God promised. (Galatians 3:15-18). Even in this we have an already and not yet. Abraham and Sarah believe and receive a son, but not yet, not the Son who would be born thousands of years later.

The Explanation (v.13-16)

This is so amazing – that faith is both patient and powerful when believing God’s promises – that the author explains how important this living by a forward looking faith is.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, 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.

Faith’s Principles (v.13-16a)

The reason they lived like this and persevered as they did and as we should, is because their faith was real. We know it was real because of the affect it had. Or, to put it another way, what came from that faith had in it the essence of what was believed and evidence that the unseen was real.

Faith can wait till after death for the fullness of what is promised (v.13). It knows that we are living between the promise and the fulfillment and perseveres until the fulfillment actually happens.

Faith sees what God promises from a long way off. It welcomes it or greets it from afar. Faith is like knowing your loved one is coming and you long for it and wait for it and welcome it and all of that makes the way you live now sweeter and better and fuller. But she is not home yet.

Faith is seeking what is promised. Faith desires what is promised. So often our trouble is that we don’t really care about that which God has promised: we don’t long for it and hunger for it, so we don’t have it.

Faith talks about these things so that there is real clarity about them in our souls. Faith confessed and discussed and lived profoundly shapes us for heavenly mindedness and earthly usefulness.

Faith presses forward even when opportunities are there to return to the past way of living. Faith keeps firm grip and ever upward climbing the heavenward cast anchor.

See how the author is calling us to persevere by faith? See how this connects to chapter 10. What we are to do in gathering together is to stir up this kind of faith. We are to so speak about God, His person, perfections and promises so that we see them in our souls, welcome and say, “Helloooooo” to them even when we know they are afar off. We do this together because we are pilgrims and are living in spiritual tents. Then there will come that day when we will arrive at the homeland.

Faith’s Product (v.16b)

God is not ashamed to be called their God. When we live committed to God’s promises, confessing that we are just passing through and hungering and thirsting for our heavenly home, then we bring pleasure to God. But when we don’t bank our hope in God’s promises and live as though we need everything now and are not longing for heaven then we embarrass God. We bring Him shame.

What a great thing it is when is God is not ashamed to be called, our God.

Reflect and Respond

Now we have met several men who are said to have done what they did in the way they did it, *by faith*. Abel offers a better sacrifice, Enoch pleases God in His walk, Noah builds an ark, Abraham leaves his homeland looking for heaven and Sarah conceives a son. Now I want to show you how important it is that we know our Old Testaments and that we always go back to look at texts that are quoted by New Testament writers. Do you know the surprising thing when you go back to these accounts in Genesis? *Not one of them mentions faith.*

Now that is a problem. How does the author know these men did what they did by faith? Remember, he is not arguing for the nature of faith from these texts. He is not saying, “Because I find faith mentioned in these stories, therefore faith must be the way they please God.” His argument is just the opposite, in fact. He sees faith in the stories, not because it is mentioned,

but because these men did please God. There is no other way to please Him than by faith.

Listen to the Divine logic here:

Assertion: Only when we believe God in an obeying way do we please God. Faith is the only way to please God.

Observation: Enoch pleased God because God took him up to heaven.

Conclusion: Enoch had faith.

Is God ashamed to be called your God?

Does your faith obey even when you cannot see how it will all turn out?

Does your faith see this life and as short and temporary and to be lived utterly for heaven and God?

Is yours the kind of faith that holds fast even when there is the possibility of never receiving what is promised in this life? Is your faith patient?

Does your faith see the realities that God has promised, and embraces them even from a distance?

If so, God is not ashamed to called your God.