

IV. The Legacy of Faith (11:1-12:29)

The Hebrews writer believed that persevering faith was the answer to every challenge confronting his readers. They shared many hardships and afflictions in common, while each one also faced his own internal and external struggles. But whatever threatened them and their well-being, the one remedy was to hold tightly to the One they'd come to believe in and embrace as Israel's Messiah. This wouldn't deliver them from their difficulties; to the contrary, it almost certainly would intensify them. On the other hand, departing from Jesus would relieve their persecution and suffering, but it wouldn't give them peace. For they'd be departing from their God, not returning to Him as their Jewish countrymen were insisting.

Even more, they'd be renouncing their own heritage as Abraham's covenant children. Leaving Jesus wouldn't return them to the household of Israel, but set them against it. For the true children of Abraham were those Israelites who lived in the light of the covenant and its promises, the promises that all looked to the Messiah and were now fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Abraham lived according to the righteousness of faith in the God who promised (ref. Genesis 15:1-6), and so it was with his offspring who could legitimately claim him as their father (Romans 4:1-17). The *faithful* in Israel were the true children of the covenant, and so also the children of the covenant God. And so it was for these Hebrews: If they really wanted to claim their place alongside their forefathers as Abraham's offspring, they needed to own Abraham's faith. Thus the writer punctuated his exhortation to persevere in faith by reminding his readers that this path set them squarely in their heritage as Yahweh's people; indeed, all those whom they revered as Israel's heroes had walked this same path before them.

A. The Cloud of Witnesses (11:1-40)

1. The writer prepared a sweeping summary of the faithful across Israel's history, but before he presented it he wanted to properly *frame* their faithfulness by clarifying the concept of faith. For, without a right understanding of faith itself, his readers would surely misjudge the faithfulness of their forefathers, and so assign to them a virtue and commendation with God that is foreign to that which they actually enjoyed. His approach was threefold: First, he provided a concise summary of faith's nature and essential working (11:1); second, he ascribed *that* sort of faith to the faithful of Israel's past (11:2); finally, he exemplified the operation of faith by showing how it appraises the created order (11:3).
 - a. The writer's summary of faith consists of two parts. The first (11:1a) focuses on the relationship between faith and God's *purposes*. Specifically, faith draws the future into the present. In the author's words, faith gives substance to that which is hoped for. That is to say, it effectively draws into the present what is to be realized in the future. This underscores the crucial truth that faith pertains to what *God* has ordained and promised, not a person's own wishes and hopes. For this reason, faith looks backward as well as forward: It binds itself to God's integrity and faithfulness to His purposes, so that what is to come stands on the foundation of what He's already accomplished. For Israel in the time of preparation, their experience of God's faithfulness in working all things according to His will enabled them to embrace the messianic fulfillment as if it had already occurred.

The second part, then, speaks to the relationship between faith and God's *veracity* (His integrity and truthfulness) (11:1b). Specifically, faith certifies – authenticates as true and real – that which isn't seen; that which isn't available to the senses. Faith looks beyond circumstance and appearance to the God who has spoken and acted, and so lays hold of truth that transcends observation and experience. In this way, faith operates as a new human faculty that functions beyond the natural means of human knowledge, i.e., the mind's processing of information obtained from the five physical senses. Faith allows a person to perceive what he cannot with his natural senses, and so affords new capacity of insight and understanding.

At the same time, faith doesn't bypass or negate the natural faculties, but rather enables them to accomplish the function for which God created them. Faith enables *sight* (natural perception) to become *insight*, so that "seeing we see, and perceiving we understand" (Matthew 13:10-16). The implication, then, is that faith is fundamental to man as truly human – man as divine image-son who sees with God's eyes, thinks His thoughts, and judges with His judgment.

- b. Put simply, faith enables a person to perceive the truth behind the information that his physical senses collect and his mind processes. It doesn't alter facts or the realities of God's creation, but it reaches beyond them to discern their *meaning*, and therefore their truth. For truth is a matter of function rather than form: The truth of a thing consists in its conformity to its intended purpose, not the fact of its existence. From the Scripture's perspective, truth exists when *word* and *deed* coincide. So God's words and deeds coincide to perfectly express His being: *He is who He shows Himself to be through what He says and does*. Thus the full truth of God is manifest in the living, speaking and acting person of Jesus the Messiah.

And what is true of God Himself is also true of everything He created. If one would know the *truth* of the creation, he must discern the reason for its existence (function) and not simply its features and properties (form). The Scripture itself recognizes this, so that its account of creation focuses on God's purpose in creating, not the mechanics and processes behind the creation. The truth of the creation is its *why*, not its *what*, *when* and *how*, but the "why" lies beyond the reach of natural human inquiry; it is accessible only to faith, which understands the creation in terms of God's revealed purpose and His faithfulness to it.

The created order, then, provides an excellent case study in the relationship between faith and truth, and the Hebrews writer drew on it in his argument to his readers (11:3). In doing so, he underscored two particulars already mentioned in the present treatment. First, faith begins with the God who *Himself* is truth, and being the Creator, is the point of reference for discerning the truth of any created thing. A thing *is* what God created it to be, highlighting again that truth pertains to purpose and function. And not as men might perceive them, but as God intended them. Second, truth is a matter of *meaning*, and meaning is determined by the God who created and directs all things according to His purpose. So faith is the divinely-imparted capacity to discern that meaning; to perceive as God perceives.

So the writer noted that faith is the faculty by which we discern that “*the ages were prepared by the word of God.*” Most English versions substitute *worlds* or *universe* for the noun, *ages*, but this introduces a different connotation. Those renderings emphasize the material substance of the creation, suggesting that the writer’s point was simply that God created the material universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by speaking it into existence (v. 3b). This is certainly true, but the wider context indicates that the writer was making a slightly different point: Again, his focus wasn’t on how God created, but His purpose in creating. The noun he chose (“the ages”) conveys this emphasis by connoting origin, development, direction and destiny – that is, time and space as intentionally dynamic, rather than random and static. Faith, then, recognizes, not merely the fact and content of the material universe, but its meaning: where it came from and where it is going.

This, in turn, gives a different sense and significance to the concept of creation by divine *word*. Again, where the focus is on the fact of the creation, faith simply affirms that God created it by the power of His spoken word. But the writer was saying more than this, evident in his verb choice: God *prepared* the ages. His point wasn’t that God used words to create, but that His words made manifest His intent and scheme for a created order that He would flood with His power, love, wisdom, and goodness, and that through a particular created being (Genesis 1-2; cf. the overall theme of Psalm 33; also Psalm 8, 148; Isaiah 42:1-12, 45:12-18).

And this emphasis on purpose shapes the way we understand the writer’s further statement that “*what is observed didn’t originate from what appears*” (i.e., from is apparent to our senses). His point was that observable reality has its source in something not accessible to our senses. And because truth concerns meaning, and meaning is found in intended purpose, observation cannot tell us the truth of the creation. This is precisely the quandary of the “big bang” and the origin of the universe. Observation traces the universe and its matter and energy back to a singularity point in time and space, but it cannot reach behind that point to answer the question of origination. This question is forefront for many people, but faith recognizes that it isn’t the issue in arriving at truth. What ultimately matters isn’t the *how*, or even the *who*, but the *why*. Again, this is the perspective on “origins” assumed by the Genesis creation account, and the truth it endeavors to convey.

- c. Faith, then, concerns the God who *is*, and who speaks and acts according to purpose and promise. It is a human attribute in the truest sense, for it describes human perception, understanding, and conviction as they correspond to their divine counterparts. For this reason, faith has its full expression in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, but then also in those whose faith is set upon Him as sharers in His life and mind. Faith has thus attained its *destiny* in the present “fullness of the times” (Galatians 3:23-29), but this implies that it was always moving toward this goal. Faith has always been the mark of human authenticity, which is defined by right relation with God, since man is image-bearer created to be image-son. Hence the writer observed that faith attested the “men of old” (literally, *the elders*), bearing witness of them in the sense of commending them to God.

Faith commends human beings to God, not as an alternative to “works,” but because it denotes human existence in conformity to God’s intent for His human creature. Faith involves a heart, mind, and will bound over to the truth of the living God disclosed in His words and deeds. It owns God as *true*: ever faithful to His purposes, which have now become yes and amen in the incarnate Son. Jesus embodies the truth of the God who is faithful, but also the truth of faithful man, and this is the sense in which He declared that He *is* the truth.

The writer’s summary of faith is brief and general, and so easily passed over with little thought or real consideration. But it is profound and critically important, not just to this Hebrews context, but to every Christian’s understanding and practice as a follower of Jesus. For many, faith is one of the two alternatives God provided for “getting saved,” but this notion is a disfigured caricature. Faith isn’t a mechanism for achieving an outcome, but the essence of what it means to be human. Hence some summary observations:

- 1) First and foremost, faith is a *non-physical faculty* that accords with man as divine image-bearer. It doesn’t supplant the physical faculties of perception and understanding, but makes them effective as God intends. Faith reaches beyond data to meaning, and so enables people to discern truth and conform to it, including the truth of themselves. And because God is the essence and source of all truth, and He is fully revealed in His Son, faith has Jesus as its focal point.
- 2) Faith is *theological* and *relational*, and therefore *christological*. It binds a person to the truth by binding him to the God who is the truth – the God who discloses and imparts the truth of Himself in Jesus the Messiah. This means that faith is neither belief in demonstrable truths, nor wishful thinking; both are operations of the natural mind, and so have nothing to do with faith. Faith is agreement with God – in mind, heart, and will – that He Himself effects by His Spirit. This has always been the case, but with Jesus’ triumph, faith is now a christological phenomenon; it is the pattern of human existence that marks those in Christ.
- 3) Faith, then, is a *state of being*, not an action or transactional mechanism. Therefore, it endures forever as the way in which human beings exist, relate to God, and fulfill their identity and calling as image-children. This is especially important, given the common notion of faith as simply the appropriate response to the fact of Jesus’ atoning death. Again, faith is typically contrasted with “works” (self-effort toward “righteousness”) as the alternative way in which people can meet God’s requirement for human beings entering heaven. They either meet that demand themselves, or accept “by faith” Jesus’ fulfillment of that demand.
- 4) Finally, faith isn’t *counter to reason and deference to facts*. It isn’t “checking one’s brain at the door,” as many people believe, though sadly many Christians reinforce this idea by the way they relate biblical and extra-biblical truth. There is a long tradition of using the Bible to vindicate every sort of notion and conviction (scientific, cultural, etc.), whereas many today separate faith and reason, and so disallow the Scriptures from speaking to issues pertaining to life in this world.