

Jesus, Author *and* Perfecter of Our Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 10:35–39, Rom. 1:17, Hebrews 11, Josh. 2:9–11, Heb. 12:1–3.*

Memory Text: “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (*Hebrews 12:2, NKJV*).

Hebrews 11 and 12 are probably the most-loved chapters of the book. They describe the Christian life as a race in which we all participate and in which all who stay faithful will receive the reward. They also describe the drama of Redemption as a race in which people of faith from the past persevered, despite sufferings, but have not yet received the reward.

And that's because the story ends with us, as well, not just them. We are the concluding act. The drama culminates with our entering and running the last part of the race, and with Jesus seated at the goal line at the right hand of God. He provides inspiration as well as the ultimate example of how the race is run. He is the ultimate Witness that the reward is true and that He is the Forerunner who opens the way for us (*Heb. 6:19, 20; Heb. 10:19–23*).

Hebrews 11 explains that faith is confidence in God's promises, even if we cannot see their fulfillment yet. This lesson will explore what faith is and how it is obtained through the examples of the past and, especially and centrally, through the example of Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (*Heb. 12:2, ESV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 12.

The Righteous Will Live by Faith

Read Hebrews 10:35–39. What is God saying to us in these verses?

Endurance is a characteristic of God's end-time people, without which they will not be able to receive the promises (*Rev. 13:10, Rev. 14:12*). In order to endure, however, believers need to "hold fast" their faith (*Heb. 10:23, Heb. 4:14*). Paul has shown that the desert generation was not able to receive the promise because they lacked faith (*Heb. 3:19*). Hebrews portrays believers as also at the threshold of the fulfillment of the promises (*Heb. 9:28; Heb. 10:25, 36–38*) and as needing to exercise faith if they want to receive the promises (*Heb. 10:39*).

Paul introduces his exposition on faith with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:2–4. Habakkuk had asked God why He tolerated the treacherous people who oppressed the righteous (*Hab. 1:12–17*). The prophet and his people were suffering; thus, they wanted God to act. God answered, however, that there was an appointed time for the fulfillment of His promise, and they needed to wait (*Hab. 2:2–4*). Habakkuk and his people lived, like us, between the time of the promise and the time of its fulfillment. God's message continued in Hebrews, " 'He who is coming will come and will not delay' " (*Heb. 10:37, NIV; see also Hab. 2:3*).

The message refers to Jesus. He is the righteous one, the embodiment of faith, who pleases God and provides life (*Heb. 10:5–10*).

Why, then, would He "delay"? He won't. He already has come to die for us (*Heb. 9:15–26*), and He will surely come again at the appointed time (*Heb. 9:27, 28; Heb. 10:25*).

God's message continued: " 'My righteous one shall live by faith' " (*Heb. 10:38, ESV*). Paul states the same in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11. Romans 1:16, 17 is especially enlightening because it explains that the righteousness of God is "revealed from faith to faith." What Paul means is that God's faithfulness to His promises comes first, and His faithfulness produces, as its result, our faith and/or faithfulness.

Thus, because God remains faithful to His promises (*2 Tim. 2:13*), the righteous, in response to God's faithfulness, will remain faithful, as well.

Why is it important to recognize that our faith results from and feeds on God's faithfulness? How can we learn more to trust in His faithfulness to us and to the promises He has made to us?

By Faith, Abraham . . .

Hebrews defines faith as “confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (*Heb. 11:1, NIV*). Then it provides a list of faithful people from the history of Israel who exemplify what faith is, and it shows how they manifested that faith by their deeds.

Read Hebrews 11:1–19. What did these “heroes” of faith do that exemplified their faith? How are their actions related to the hope of things not seen?

Abraham is probably the most important character in this chapter. Abraham’s last act of faith is especially instructive regarding the true nature of faith.

Hebrews notes that God’s instruction to Abraham that he offer Isaac as a sacrifice seemed to imply a contradiction on God’s part (*Heb. 11:17, 18*). Isaac was not the only son of Abraham. Ishmael was the firstborn of Abraham, but God had told Abraham that it was all right for him to accept Sarah’s request and cast Ishmael and his mother out because God would take care of them, and because Abraham’s offspring would be named through Isaac (*Gen. 21:12, 13*). In the next chapter, however, God asks Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. God’s instruction in Genesis 22 seemed to flatly contradict God’s promises in Genesis 12–21.

Hebrews concludes that Abraham amazingly solved the conundrum by arriving at the conclusion that God would resurrect Isaac after he had offered him. This is amazing because no one had yet been resurrected. It seems, however, that Abraham’s previous experience with God led him to that conclusion. Hebrews 11:12 notes that Isaac was conceived by the power of God from one who was “as good as dead.” Paul also noted that despite Abraham’s being “as good as dead” and Sarah barren, Abraham believed “in hope . . . against hope, that he should become the father of many nations” because he believed that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (*Rom. 4:17–20, ESV*). Thus, Abraham must have assumed that if God in some sense already had given life to Isaac from the dead, He could do it again. In God’s leading in the past, Abraham saw an intimation of what He could do in the future.

Why is meditating on how God has led our lives in the past so crucial for maintaining our faith and trust in Him now?

Moses: Believing in the Unseen

Read Hebrews 11:20–28. What did these men of faith do? How are their actions related to hope and to things not seen?

Moses is the second major example in this chapter of faith. The life of Moses is introduced and concluded by two actions of defiance to the king. His parents hid him when he was born, because “they were not afraid of the king’s edict” (*Heb. 11:23, ESV*), and Moses left Egypt, “not being afraid of the anger of the king” (*Heb. 11:27, ESV*). The most significant action of Moses was, however, that he “refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter” (*Heb. 11:24*). The reference to Moses’ adoptive mother as “Pharaoh’s daughter” suggests that he was slated to be the next Pharaoh. Moses, however, was willing to leave behind the prospect of becoming the ruler of the most powerful nation at that time and to become, instead, the leader of newly freed slaves—refugees, actually.

Compare Hebrews 11:24–27 and Hebrews 10:32–35. What were the similarities between the situation of the original recipients of Hebrews and the experience of Moses?

The greatness of Moses was that he was able to see beyond the promises of the king of Egypt and look toward the unseen, namely, the promises of God. Hebrews says the key was that Moses’ sight was fixed on “the reward,” not on the riches of Egypt. This reward is the same reward mentioned in Hebrews 10:35, which God has promised to all who believe in Him.

Paul’s words about Moses’ decision must have echoed powerfully in the hearts of his original readers. They had been enduring reproaches and insults because of their faith in Christ. They also had been afflicted and lost their possessions (*Heb. 10:32–34*). Some were in prison (*Heb. 13:3*). In parallel sense, Moses chose to be mistreated with God’s people, exchanging the wealth of Egypt for bearing the insults associated with Christ because he believed that the reward of Christ was greater than whatever Egypt could offer.

What are some of the struggles that you have faced because of your faith? What have you had to give up for it? Why, ultimately, is the reward worth it, even if you can’t see it now?

By Faith, Rahab and the Rest . . .

Read Hebrews 11:31 and Joshua 2:9–11. Why was Rahab, a pagan prostitute, included in this text of sacred biblical characters?

Rahab is probably the most unexpected character whom we find in Hebrews 11. Rahab is one of two women mentioned by name. She is the tenth in the list, the first being forefathers and patriarchs of Israel, and each one is regarded as being righteous. When we come to her, we find that she not only is a woman but also a Gentile prostitute.

The most surprising thing is that she also is the thematic center and climax of the chapter. The list is organized in a unique way. Each entry begins with the repetitive use of the phrase “by faith.” The basic pattern is “By faith, So-and-so did such and such” or “By faith, such and such happened to So-and-so.” This repetitive pattern increases the expectation in the reader to hear the climactic assertion that “*by faith, Joshua led the people into the promised land.*”

But that’s not what the text says. Instead, Joshua is passed over, and the prostitute takes his place. After the mention of Rahab, the repetitive pattern ends abruptly with “and what more shall I say?” (*Heb. 11:32, NKJV*). Then, Paul hurriedly lists some names and events that he does not explain in detail.

Rahab’s deed of faith was that she heard, believed, and obeyed, even though she did not see. She did not see the plagues of Egypt or the deliverance in the Red Sea or the water flow from the rock or the bread descend from heaven, yet, she believed. She was a good exemplar for the audience of Hebrews, who did not hear Jesus preach or see Him do a miracle, and for us, as well, who did not see any of these things either.

“Rahab was a harlot who lived on the wall of Jericho. She hid the two Israelite spies sent to check out the defenses of that city. Because of her kindness to them, and her declaration of belief in God, the spies promised that the lives of Rahab and her family would be spared when the attack came on Jericho.”—Introduction to Rahab found in Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God*, p. 35.

Paul then continues (*Heb. 11:35–38*) with a list of the hardships many faced. The phrase “refusing to accept release” (*Heb. 11:35, ESV*) implies that they had the possibility to escape but chose not to, because their sights were set on the reward of God.

Though we have not seen any of these things happen (the six-day Creation, the Exodus, the cross of Christ), why do we have so many good reasons for believing that they did?

Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of Our Faith

Read Hebrews 12:1–3. What do these verses ask us to do?

The climax of the exposition on faith really arrives with Jesus in Hebrews 12. Paul started the letter with Jesus, who is the “coming one” and who “will not delay” (*Heb. 10:37, ESV*), and Paul concludes it with Jesus the “perfecter” of our faith (*Heb. 12:2, ESV*). Jesus is the “author and perfecter of faith” (*NASB*). This means that Jesus is the One who makes faith possible and is the Example who perfectly embodies what a life of faith is all about. With Jesus, faith has reached its perfect expression.

Jesus is the “founder” (*Heb. 12:2, ESV*), or author or pioneer, of our faith in at least three senses.

First, He is the only one who has finished the race in its fullest sense. The others talked about in the previous chapter have not yet reached their goal (*Heb. 11:39, 40*). Jesus, however, has entered God’s rest in heaven and is seated at the Father’s right hand. We, together with these others, will reign with Jesus in heaven (*Rev. 20:4*).

Second, it was actually Jesus’ perfect life that has made it possible for these others to run their race (*Heb. 10:5–14*). If Jesus had not come, the race of everyone else would have been futile.

Finally, Jesus is the reason we have faith. As one with God, He expressed the faithfulness of God toward us. God never gave up in His efforts to save us, and that is why we will reach the reward in the end if we don’t give up. Jesus ran with patience and remained faithful, even when we were faithless (*2 Tim. 2:13*). Our faith is only a response to His faithfulness.

In the end, Jesus is the “perfecter” of faith because He perfectly exemplifies how the race of faith is run. How did He run? He laid aside every weight by giving up everything for us (*Phil. 2:5–8*). He never sinned, ever. Jesus held His sight firmly on the reward, which was the joy set before Him, that of seeing the human race redeemed by His grace. So, He endured misunderstanding and abuse; He stared down the shame of the cross (*Heb. 12:2, 3*).

Now it is our turn to run. Though we can never achieve what Jesus did in our own strength, we have His perfect example before us, and so by faith in Him, and keeping our eyes on Him (as have the others before us), we press on ahead in faith, trusting in His promises of a great reward.

Further Thought: “By faith you became Christ’s, and by faith you are to grow up in Him—by giving and taking. You are to give all,—your heart, your will, your service,—give yourself to Him to obey all His requirements; and you must take all,—Christ, the fullness of all blessing, to abide in your heart, to be your strength, your righteousness, your everlasting helper,—to give you power to obey.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 70.

“God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt. Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration. Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith.

“It is impossible for finite minds fully to comprehend the character or the works of the Infinite One. To the keenest intellect, the most highly educated mind, that holy Being must ever remain clothed in mystery. ‘Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know?’ Job 11:7, 8.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 105.

Discussion Questions:

- ① An early Christian scholar once wrote: “*Credo ut intelligam*,” Latin for “I believe in order that I may understand.” Hebrews 11:3 says that “by faith we understand” (*NKJV*). What is the relationship between faith and understanding? Why does faith often come before understanding? That is, why must we sometimes reach out in faith in what, at least at first, we don’t understand, and then afterward more understanding will come?
- ② The Greek word *pistis* means both “faith” and “faithfulness.” Why are both meanings important in seeking to understand what living “by faith” means? How did the people in Hebrews 11 show, by their faithfulness, the reality of their faith? How can we do the same?
- ③ Though we understand that faith is a gift of God (*Rom. 12:3*), what role do we play, if any, in receiving and maintaining that gift?