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HEBREWS

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Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary

General Editors

T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner,
Andreas J. Köstenberger

Assistant Editors

James M. Hamilton, Kenneth A. Mathews,
Terry L. Wilder

Thomas R. Schreiner





Hebrews

Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary

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Hebrews 11:1-2

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1-4)
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5-2:18)
- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)
- IV. Don't Fall Away from Jesus' Melchizedekian Priesthood Since It Is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-10:18)
- V. **Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:19-12:29)**
 - A. Exhortation to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Help Others (10:19-25)
 - B. Warning: No Hope of Forgiveness for Those Who Turn from Christ (10:26-31)
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 - a. **Nature of Faith (11:1-2)**
 - b. Creation Through Noah (11:3-7)
 - c. The Faith of Abraham and His Heirs (11:8-22)
 - d. The Faith of Moses and Those Entering the Land (11:23-31)
 - e. A Closing Catalog of Faith (11:32-40)
 - f. Run the Race Looking to Jesus as Supreme Exemplar of Faith (12:1-3)
 - D. Exhortations to Readers to Endure (12:4-29)

Scripture

¹Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen. ²For our ancestors won God's approval by it.

Context

In popular circles Hebrews 11 is often disconnected from the rest of the letter, but it fits with the exhortation section which begins in 10:19. We have seen in 10:19-39 that the author encourages the

believers to hold fast and warns them of the danger of falling away. Chapter 10 ends with a call to faith. Those who believe will enjoy eschatological life, but those who shrink back will be destroyed. Chapter 11 is tucked into the exhortation section of the letter by highlighting the nature and character of saving faith. It should be said, however, that chapter 11 itself does not constitute an exhortation but provides examples that serve the exhortation.⁵³⁵ The writer illustrates the nature of that faith by giving many examples of such faith in the OT.⁵³⁶ Earlier in the letter the author encourages the readers to imitate those who “inherit the promises through faith and perseverance” (6:12). The examples conclude in chapter 12 with Jesus as the supreme exemplar of faith. The readers must keep believing to be saved on the last day, and they should follow the example of faith set by OT saints and by Jesus to receive final salvation.

L. Johnson captures well the literary impact of the chapter. “Part of the section’s dramatic impact comes from the way it begins in such a leisurely fashion, lingering over named figures, with an emphasis on God’s promises and rewards, and then builds toward an ever more rapid recitation of hardships suffered by unnamed forebears in the faith.”⁵³⁷

The author begins by explaining how faith behaves. Faith is confident and sure that what is hoped for will be given; it is assured that what is promised but unseen will come true (v. 1). It is this kind of faith, trusting in what has not yet been seen or given that gave OT ancestors favor before God (v. 2).

Exegesis

11:1

Verse 1 explains the nature of faith, not by completely defining faith but by explaining how faith works. Despite the hesitation of

⁵³⁵ Cf. Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 518. At the end of the day, the difference isn’t great, for the examples and exposition are included to motivate the readers to action (Guthrie, *Structure of Hebrews*, 40).

⁵³⁶ Such example lists were common in both Greco-Roman and Jewish circles. The Jewish background is particularly important (cf. Sirach 44–50; Wisdom 10). Cf. here Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 516. For further discussion of the matter, see Michael R. Cosby, *The Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11: In Light of Example Lists in Antiquity* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

⁵³⁷ L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 275. For an excellent study of the literary features and impact of chapter 11, see Cosby, *Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11*.

many commentators, a definition of faith, even though partial, is found here.⁵³⁸ Faith is assured that what is hoped for will become a reality. It is convinced that the unseen promises of God will be fulfilled.

Many scholars dispute this reading of the verse, and they propose an alternate reading. The alternate reading is reflected in the HCSB, “Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.” The word “reality” (ὑπόστασις) here is translated “confidence” (NIV, NLT) or “assurance” (ESV, NRSV) by other translations.⁵³⁹ Those who support the translation reflected in the HCSB argue that the word used here (ὑπόστασις) never has the idea of subjective confidence or assurance. For example, BDAG says that confidence “must be eliminated, since examples of it cannot be found.”⁵⁴⁰ It seems, however, that this judgment is too rash, for the word denotes confidence in Ps 38:8 in the LXX, and the Hebrew word here means “hope” (יְהוֹרָה) as well.⁵⁴¹ We see the same phenomenon in Ezek 19:5 where the term (ὑπόστασις) renders another Hebrew word for “hope” (הַיְהוֹרָה). It also seems that the word “confidence” coheres well in 2 Cor 9:4 and 11:7. I argued earlier that such a reading fits with Heb 3:14 also. We have evidence, then, that “confidence” and “assurance” are in the semantic range of the word used here.⁵⁴² Most important, “confidence” or “assurance” fit the context of chapter 11. The author concluded chapter 10 by emphasizing the need for persevering faith. The OT ancestors in chapter 11 are saluted because of their trust in God’s promises, even when there was no evidence that the promises would come to pass. So the traditional rendering of 11:1 actually accords best with the context of chapter 11.

This should not be interpreted to say that the objective view is entirely without merit, for the subjective and objective meanings are

⁵³⁸ Cf. Koester, *Hebrews*, 479 (“a definition was not expected to be comprehensive but to enhance an argument”); Attridge, *Hebrews*, 307–8.

⁵³⁹ For a discussion of the various options, see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 308–10. For strong defenses of the objective reading, see Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 325–26, 328–29; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 398–400; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 520–21.

⁵⁴⁰ BDAG. Cf also LN 58.1.

⁵⁴¹ For an excellent discussion of the verse (where it is recognized that the subjective sense could be correct, though it is ultimately rejected), see L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 277–79.

⁵⁴² Cf. especially Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith*, 120–25.

tied together here. Koester rightly captures this in saying: “The subjective side emerges when *hypostasis* is linked with ‘faith,’ which pertains to the believing person. The objective side emerges when *hypostasis* is connected to ‘things hoped for,’ since the object of hope lies outside the believer.”⁵⁴³

A subjective meaning is also suggested in the next line. Even BDAG, which says there is no evidence for the meaning “confidence” or “assurance” in the first line, says the second phrase means “to be sure (ἐλεγχος) about things unseen.”⁵⁴⁴ A subjective sense for the Greek word here (ἐλεγχος) matches the notion of confidence or assurance in the first line. Faith is convinced that what God promises will most certainly be fulfilled.⁵⁴⁵ What is unseen is not completely defined in terms of future promises, for the unseen also describes past realities, such as creation (11:3), or present realities, such as God’s existence (11:6, 27), his faithfulness (11:17), and power (11:19).⁵⁴⁶

11:2

Faith and confidence in God’s promises are important, for the ancestors recorded in the OT gained approval for their faith, and the writer is about to give us a litany of those ancestors in the forthcoming verses. The word translated “won approval” (ἐμαρτυρήθησαν) often has this meaning (Acts 6:3; 10:22; 16:2; 22:12; 1 Tim 5:10; 2 John 3:12). In the context of Hebrews 11, the author means they won approval before God. Clearly, the author’s desire is for the readers to imitate the example of their illustrious ancestors so they will obtain favor before God on the last day.

Bridge

We don’t have a dissertation on faith here that is unrelated to the rest of the letter. Faith is introduced because the flip side of apostasy

⁵⁴³ Koester, *Hebrews*, 472.

⁵⁴⁴ Other scholars insist that the word means “proof” and that any subjective sense is lacking (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 310; F. Büchsel, “ἐλεγχος,” *TDNT* 2:476; Käsemann, *Wandering People*, 41–42; Koester, *Hebrews*, 473), but the meaning of the phrase must be discerned in context.

⁵⁴⁵ Richardson rightly argues that the word group has the idea of being convicted and that the notion of being convinced in one’s conscience is plausible (*Pioneer and Perfector of Faith*, 125–28).

⁵⁴⁶ Rightly Attridge, *Hebrews*, 311.

is faith. The author doesn't ask the readers to look to themselves and to summon up all their energy to persevere until the end. What it means to endure is to keep trusting God until the end. Endurance comes when we look to God for strength and put our trust in his promises. Faith means we put our trust in what God has promised, even if those promises seem impossible to us. Chapter 11 reminds us that we are not the first to take this journey; many have walked this path ahead of us, and thus we are not alone in our journey of faith.

Hebrews 11:3–7

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)
- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:13)
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Scripture

³By faith we understand that the universe was created by God's command, so that what is seen has been made from things that are not visible. ⁴By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken away so he did not experience death, and he was not to be found because God took him away. For prior to his removal he was approved, since he had pleased God. ⁶Now without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who draws near to Him must believe that He exists and rewards those who seek Him. ⁷By faith Noah, after he was warned about what was not yet seen and motivated by godly fear, built an ark to deliver his family. By faith he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Context

The author writes to encourage his readers to hold on to their faith (10:19–25) so that they don't fall away (10:26–31). They must continue to trust until the end to receive the final reward (10:32–39). In chapter 11 the author provides numerous OT examples of those who trusted in God until the end. Faith holds onto God's promises and believes that what is unseen will be realized. Faith understands that the world was created by the word of God (v. 3). Abel's faith, in contrast to Cain's unbelief, commended him as righteous (v. 4). Enoch was pleasing to God because he trusted in God, and God spared him from death (v. 5). Abel pleased God, even though he died, and Enoch pleased God and didn't die.⁵⁴⁷ Both Abel and Enoch anticipate the message of Hebrews 11 as a whole.⁵⁴⁸ As Cockerill says, "All, like Abel, will die without the fullness of what God has promised. All, like Enoch, are promised triumph over death,"⁵⁴⁹ The author pauses to reflect on the importance of faith (v. 6). One can't please God without it, for to please him one must believe he exists and rewards those who seek him. Noah's faith also stands out (v. 7).

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. here Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 335.

⁵⁴⁸ Cf. Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 526.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 526.

He believed in what wasn't yet visible when God pronounced judgment on the world. He stood out from the world in preparing an ark for the rescue of his family so that he too was righteous by his faith.

Exegesis

11:3

The author now begins to give examples of faith, beginning with creation (see §7). No one observed the creation, and what happened at the inception of the world can't be verified or reproduced in laboratories. Believers "understand" and comprehend "by faith" that the world was "created" (*κατηρτίσθαι*) or "formed" (NIV) or "prepared" (NRSV) by the word of God (cf. Pss 73:16; 88:8; Rom 9:22).⁵⁵⁰ Here the writer reflects on Genesis 1 where God speaks and his word is effective in that what he speaks becomes a reality so that the things in the world come into existence (Gen 1:3, 6–7, 9, 11, 14, 15, 20–21, 24, 26–27). We find a similar notion in Ps 33:6, "The heavens were made by the word of the LORD" (cf. Ps 148:5).

The result clause could be taken in various ways. The HCSB (cf. also NRSV) rendering indicates that the visible world derives from invisible "things": "so that what is seen has been made from things that are not visible."⁵⁵¹ This could be read to say that visible realities derive from "real things," namely, the word of God.⁵⁵² The problem with this reading is that the invisible things are plural (*ἐκ φαινόμενων*) and the word of God is singular.⁵⁵³ Nor is it likely that the author refers to the earth submerged by the chaos described in Gen 1:2,⁵⁵⁴ for the earth though covered was still part of what was visible, and we shouldn't separate the earth and the chaos in the creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:3).

The NIV and ESV take the negative with the infinitive: "so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." Grammatically, the ESV and NIV readings are preferable, for it is more likely that the negative modifies the infinitive "made" (*γεγονέναι*) instead of the prepositional phrase "out of things that are visible" (*ἐκ*

⁵⁵⁰ Both psalm texts are from the LXX.

⁵⁵¹ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 315–16.

⁵⁵² So Koester, *Hebrews*, 474; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 569; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 401–2. On this view the negative "not" (*μή*) modifies the participle "visible" (*φαινόμενων*).

⁵⁵³ Adams, "Cosmology of Hebrews," 128.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 127–28.

φαινομένων).⁵⁵⁵ The interpretation favored here fits nicely with what the author is doing in this chapter. The creation of the world is a miracle, and it doesn't derive from preexisting material.⁵⁵⁶ Creation out of nothing can't be demonstrated empirically (though neither can the contrary!), and it is embraced by faith (see §1).

11:4

The author moves from creation to Abel and Cain. Abel brought a “better sacrifice” than Cain because of his faith (Gen 4:3–5). What is remarkable is that Genesis says nothing about Abel's faith. It simply records what he did. Perhaps Genesis signals the acceptability of Abel's sacrifice in that he offered “the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions,” whereas Cain did not offer what was best from his crops (Gen 4:4).⁵⁵⁷ But how does the author of Hebrews see faith when Genesis is silent on the matter? It seems that any act of obedience that pleases God (cf. 11:8 below) flows from faith (cf. the discussion on 3:12–4:11 as well). The wellspring of obedience is always an attitude of trust. It follows, then, that the fundamental sin of Cain was unbelief. His offering was not accepted because he didn't trust in God.

Abel was approved by God as righteous. The author considers here the words of Gen 4:4: “The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering.” Such regard shows that Abel was righteous in God's sight, though Hebrews emphasizes that such righteousness stems from his faith. In this regard Hebrews matches Paul's teaching that righteousness is by faith. Abel's gifts were the visible expression of his faith, documenting and ratifying the authenticity of his faith. Abel no longer lives, but his faith lives after him, commending him as an

⁵⁵⁵ So Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 326–27; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 443. For the alternative, see Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 569.

⁵⁵⁶ It is difficult to discern here whether the author argues for creation out of nothing (see Philip E. Hughes, “The Doctrine of Creation in Hebrews 11:3,” *BTB* 2 [1972]: 164–77; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 332). It seems to me that this is the best option, but it is difficult to be certain.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 280; Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith*, 170. Against Walter L. Moberly, who thinks the MT offers no rationale for the preference of Abel's offering (“Exemplars of Faith in Hebrews 11: Abel,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. Bauckham, D. R. Driver, T. A. Hart, and N. MacDonald [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009], 356–58).

example to the present day.⁵⁵⁸ The readers of Hebrews should derive inspiration from Abel and follow his example of trusting God.

11:5

Enoch is cited as the next example of faith (Gen 5:21–24). According to Genesis Enoch was 65 years old when his son, Methuselah, was born. Enoch “walked with God” (5:22, 24) for 300 years after Methuselah was born. When Enoch was at the age of 365, God removed him from the earth so that Enoch never died.

Hebrews interprets the story for us. The author concentrates on the fact that Enoch didn’t die, mentioning it five different times and in different ways in the verse. The writer did not expect the readers to escape death, and so his point is to see an analogy between the reward given to Enoch and the reward promised to believers. Just as Enoch escaped from death altogether, the readers will finally triumph over death when they are raised from the dead. What was remarkable about Enoch was that he “pleased” (εὐαρεστηκένοι) God. The author draws on the LXX, for the MT speaks of Enoch walking with God. Enoch pleased God, however, by virtue of his faith. His trust in God spurred him to walk with God and to do what was pleasing to him. Clearly the author emphasizes that God rewarded Enoch by sparing him from death,⁵⁵⁹ reminding the readers that it is “worth it” to serve the Lord. Perhaps the author also forecasts here the exaltation of Jesus. Just as Enoch was rewarded for his faith, so too Jesus was rewarded by being enthroned by God.⁵⁶⁰

11:6

The indispensability of faith is explained. One cannot please God without faith. Again, the conception seems close to what we find in Pauline theology (cf. Rom 14:23). Human beings are summoned to put their faith in God, entrusting the entirety of their lives to his lordship and love. God is pleased with faith because if he is trusted he is also loved, for trust in God cannot flourish without believing that he is good.

Two comments are made about faith here. First, faith is grounded upon the object of faith. One won’t draw near to God unless one believes God exists. Such belief in God is fundamental and basic,

⁵⁵⁸ Rightly O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 403–4; Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfector of Faith*, 172.

⁵⁵⁹ So L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 282.

⁵⁶⁰ So Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfector of Faith*, 176–77.

but it is scarcely sufficient. Belief in God is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. One must also believe God “rewards those who seek him.” Trust in God will not exist if there isn’t any benefit. It believes God “is powerfully active on behalf of the faithful in the present.”⁵⁶¹ If the readers truly trust God, they won’t depart from Christ and lose the reward of eternal life (10:35). Moses chose to suffer with the people of God because he set his hope on the reward (11:26). The readers are invited to trust in God because ultimately it will bring them the most pleasure. They will “drink from the river of your delights” (Ps 36:8 NRSV).

11:7

Noah functions as the next example in the author’s portrait of faith. God instructed Noah about what was not yet seen, informing him that the entire world would be destroyed by a flood (Gen 6:13–18). Noah exercised faith and thus was persuaded that what was not yet seen would become a reality. We have already seen that faith rests in and is convinced by the unseen promises of God (11:1). Faith can’t “see” how the world was created but trusts that God made all things. Noah had no conception of the torrent of destruction that would descend on the world, but he believed in what God said even though he had never beheld it. In the same way the readers should look to the unseen and believe that what God promised would be realized.

In “godly fear” (εὐλαβηθεῖς) Noah believed what God said, and since he was convinced a judgment was coming, he constructed an ark for the deliverance (σωτηρίαν) of his household. The readers should imitate Noah, for deliverance for them is not just physical but relates to whether they will enter the heavenly city. Noah condemned the world by his faith because he showed that he trusted God, had given himself to God, and belonged to God. He didn’t give himself over to evil as the culture of his day had. He submitted his will to God. And thus he received a right relationship with God “that comes by faith” (ESV). The world was condemned because it wasn’t rightly related to God, and its inhabitants weren’t rightly related to God because they didn’t trust in him or obey him.⁵⁶² On the other

⁵⁶¹ Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 531.

⁵⁶² Hence, there isn’t any notion here of Noah preaching to his contemporaries (O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 408; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 533).

hand, the inheritance described here may not fit the “Pauline” category sketched in above.⁵⁶³ Perhaps Noah received the inheritance in part at his death (12:23) and will enjoy its fullness on the final day (10:25). The author would be emphasizing, then, that Noah receives the kingdom promised to believers (12:28). Another possibility is that the author conceives of the postflood world as the inheritance Noah received. It was, so to speak, a new world that was purified and restored. If this last option is preferred, the author of Hebrews would see the inheritance given to Noah as anticipating the future kingdom (12:28) and the heavenly city (11:10–16; 12:22; 13:14).

Bridge

Faith looks to what is unseen, trusting in the promise of God. Faith isn’t irrational. It believes in a God who truly created the world, who rescued Enoch from death and Noah from the flood. But faith doesn’t see these things from the beginning. It believes God will reward those who seek him. It trusts God, as Abel did, even though death is the immediate consequence. Faith doesn’t rely on the contemporary events or perceptions but puts its trust and hope in the word of God and in his promises for his people.

Hebrews 11:8–22

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. Don’t Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)
- III. Don’t Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:13)
- IV. Don’t Fall Away from Jesus’ Melchizedekian Priesthood Since It Is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14–10:18)
- V. **Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:19–12:29)**
 - A. Exhortation to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Help Others (10:19–25)

⁵⁶³ For a good discussion of the various options, see Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith*, 179–83.

- B. Warning: No Hope of Forgiveness for Those Who Turn from Christ (10:26–31)
- C. **Call to Persevere in Faith (10:32–12:3)**
 - 1. Don't Abandon Confidence but Endure in Faith (10:32–39)
 - 2. **Description and Examples of Persevering Faith (11:1–12:3)**
 - a. Nature of Faith (11:1–2)
 - b. Creation Through Noah (11:3–7)
 - c. **The Faith of Abraham and His Heirs (11:8–22)**
 - d. The Faith of Moses and Those Entering the Land (11:23–31)
 - e. A Closing Catalog of Faith (11:32–40)
 - f. Run the Race Looking to Jesus as Supreme Exemplar of Faith (12:1–3)
- D. Exhortations to Readers to Endure (12:4–29)

Scripture

⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, co-heirs of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith even Sarah herself, when she was unable to have children, received power to conceive offspring, even though she was past the age, since she considered that the One who had promised was faithful.

¹²Therefore from one man—in fact, from one as good as dead—came offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand by the seashore. ¹³These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. ¹⁴Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they were thinking about where they came from, they would have had an opportunity to return. ¹⁶But they now desire a better place—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be

called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He received the promises and he was offering his unique son,¹⁸ the one it had been said about, Your seed will be traced through Isaac.¹⁹ He considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead, and as an illustration, he received him back.²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and he worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.²² By faith Joseph, as he was nearing the end of his life, mentioned the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions concerning his bones.

Context

The exhortation section begins with a summons to keep clinging to Christ and to avoid falling away (10:19–31). The readers must not throw away their boldness but continue to trust in God until they receive the final reward (10:32–39). In chapter 11 the author illustrates the character of the faith that saves. Faith puts its confidence in God's promises that are not yet seen (11:1). By such faith the ancestors of old gained approval (11:2), whether one thinks of Abel (11:3–4), Enoch (11:5–6), or Noah (11:7). All of them pleased God. Verses 8–22 reflect on the faith of Abraham and his heirs. By faith Abraham left his homeland even though he didn't know what land was promised to him (11:8). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in the land of promise as exiles (11:9). They received strength to live as sojourners because they looked forward to the city of God (11:10). By faith Abraham and Sarah trusted in the promise of offspring, which would be as numerous as the stars of heaven (11:11–12). Still, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not see the promises fulfilled and lived as exiles (11:13). It was clear from this that they were seeking a heavenly homeland (11:14–15). On account of this, God was pleased to be their God and has prepared a city for them (11:16). Abraham offered up Isaac in faith, trusting that God would raise him from the dead if necessary (11:17–19). Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph also exercised faith, for they looked forward to the future and were confident that God would fulfill his promises (11:20–22). Faith, as this section particularly emphasizes, trusts God for the future. It looks to him for a future reward.

Exegesis

11:8

The parade of faith continues, and Abraham naturally follows Noah. The author reflects on Gen 12:1 (NASB), “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.’” And we read in Gen 12:4, “So Abram went.” Hebrews summarizes what occurred in the words, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed.” It is obvious that he obeyed, but Hebrews adds that Abraham’s obedience flowed from his faith. It is clear from what the writer tells us here that Abraham’s first act of faith did not take place in Gen 15:6, even though Gen 15:6 is the first time we are told that Abraham believed. He dared to leave his homeland only because he trusted in God. Such a comment does not contradict Paul’s declaration that Abraham was justified by faith in appealing to Gen 15:6 (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). In fact, it confirms what Paul teaches, showing that faith is the root and obedience is the fruit.

Abraham was promised a land (Gen 12:1), which would be his inheritance (11:8), but he wasn’t told the location of the land when he set out.⁵⁶⁴ He trusted that God would reveal the place of his inheritance and that God would give it to him. Faith, the author instructs the readers, does not see the end at the beginning. Faith always trusts in the promises of God, even when it looks as if they won’t be fulfilled. The readers should do the same: they must cast themselves entirely on God and believe he will give them the final inheritance.

11:9

When Abraham arrived in the land, he didn’t take immediate possession. Indeed, he didn’t possess it at all! It seemed as if God’s promise wasn’t true. He lived in the land as a sojourner and as an exile (cf. Gen 17:8; 20:1; 21:34; 24:37; 1 Chr 16:19). He didn’t establish a domicile but lived as a shepherd in tents, constantly on the move. And life was the same for Isaac and Jacob. They didn’t possess the land during their lifetimes either. They too lived as sojourners traveling from place to place in the land (Gen 26:3; 37:1; 47:9). Even though the promise was not realized in their lifetime, they clung to the promise.

⁵⁶⁴ We see here the future orientation of faith. So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 322.

11:10

How could Abraham keep trusting God when the promise of land wasn't being realized? The author argues that he was anticipating something in the future, something greater than the earthly land of Canaan. He was looking forward to the coming of a city, and this city will have "foundations," i.e., it is an unshakable city. The promise of a city hearkens back to OT promises about Jerusalem, which we are told will be secure in the future (Isa 33:20; 54:11–12; cf. Ps 87:1–3). The expectation of a new Jerusalem in the future is also found in Second Temple Judaism (2 Bar. 4:1–7; 4 Ezra 13:36; T. Dan. 5:12; Sib. Or. 5.420–33), and is present elsewhere in the NT (Gal 4:26; Phil 3:20; Rev 21:1–22:5). Nothing can shatter or displace this city. A similar thing is said about the kingdom in 12:28; it is "a kingdom that cannot be shaken." The city can't be dislodged, for its "architect and builder is God."⁵⁶⁵ No human being can overthrow the city of God. The city of man is temporary, but the city of God is eternal. We see again the typology of the writer. The land of Canaan points to something greater, something more profound and lasting than any location on earth. It points to the city of God. Abraham began to realize that there was something greater than Canaan awaiting him, that he would inherit the city of God.

11:11

Most versions understand Sarah to be the subject of the main verb.⁵⁶⁶ However, the meaning of the verse is contested.⁵⁶⁷ The alternate interpretation is captured by the NRSV, "By faith he [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised."⁵⁶⁸ According to the NRSV and other interpreters,

⁵⁶⁵ The words "architect" and "builder" are roughly synonymous here (see L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 290).

⁵⁶⁶ For this reading see, p^{13vid}, ⋈, A, D², M, Augustine. In defense of Sarah as the subject, see L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 291–92; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 472–75. In defense of the notion that Hebrews is not anti-women, see Carl Mosser, "No Lasting City: Rome, Jerusalem and the Place of Hebrews in the History of Earliest 'Christianity'" (Ph.D. diss., St. Andrews University, 2004), 245–52.

⁵⁶⁷ My discussion of the verse is largely dependent upon the work of L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 291–92.

⁵⁶⁸ In this case Sarah herself, being barren, is construed as dative (Bruce, *Hebrews*, 299–302; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 324–26; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 586–88). Or the reference to Sarah is parenthetical (Koester, *Hebrews*, 488). Lane sees it as a concessive

Abraham is the subject instead of Sarah. The most important reason for seeing a reference to Abraham is the expression the “power of procreation” (δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος), literally “the power for laying down of seed.” The activity described here fits with what men do rather than women.⁵⁶⁹ On this reading Abraham received the ability to produce sperm that could beget children even when he was an old man. If Abraham is the subject, the phrase about Sarah could be construed as a dative, which could be translated “with Sarah herself who was barren.” Or possibly the feminine participle “being” (οὖσα) is implied, so the verse says Abraham received the ability to procreate even though Sarah was barren.⁵⁷⁰ Seeing Abraham as the subject is also supported because the words “from one man” in 11:12 are clearly limited to Abraham. It is also noted that Sarah did not have faith in giving Hagar to Abraham in Genesis 16 and laughed in disbelief when the angel of the Lord told her she would have a son (Gen 18:9–12).

Despite the arguments supporting Abraham as the subject, the subject is probably Sarah for the following reasons. First, “Sarah” is clearly nominative in Greek, and there is no textual evidence for the dative. Inserting the implied participle “being” (οὖσα) seems like an unlikely solution, for it isn’t evident that the participle is elided in reading the verse, and thus the best solution grammatically is to accept Sarah as the subject. Second, Sarah may have laughed in disbelief when initially hearing the promise, but Abraham probably disbelieved in the case of Hagar and Ishmael as well (Genesis 16) and also laughed when hearing the promise (Gen 17:17). Ultimately they both ended up believing despite initial doubts. Third, the role of the one man in verse 12 doesn’t preclude Sarah’s participation and faith in having children.⁵⁷¹ Fourth and finally, the most difficult problem is the expression about laying down seed. The phrase could be understood as a purpose clause so that Sarah receives the sperm produced by Abraham and conceives. Alternatively, the language of

clause (*Hebrews* 9–13, 344–45). Ellingworth says that Lane’s proposal “attains coherence at the cost of almost intolerable strain on the Greek sentence structure” (*Hebrews*, 587).

⁵⁶⁹ See Thayer; BDAG.

⁵⁷⁰ The participle would be understood as concessive.

⁵⁷¹ Incidentally, in Jewish tradition women also contributed seed necessary for conception (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 587; F. Hauck, “καταβολή,” *TDNT*, 3.621n3).

laying down seed should not be pressed and is not used technically here. The author speaks generally of the ability to bear children.

In either case the gift of having children is due to faith on the part of both Abraham and Sarah. The God who promised that they would have children (Gen 12:2; 15:1–6; 17:5–6, 15–21; 18:10–14) was considered to be faithful, and the miraculous took place.

11:12

Therefore (διό), because of Abraham’s faith in the promise of God, many offspring were born through him. Having so many descendants was a miracle, for Abraham was as good as dead in terms of his ability to produce offspring. God, however, does what is astonishing, and he particularly works when it seems as if his promise will not be realized. Isaiah 51:2 is alluded to here: “Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain. When I called him, he was only one; I blessed him and made him many.”⁵⁷² Hence, Abraham’s offspring were as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. The wording here is close to Gen 22:17, and the author clearly appeals to this text (cf. also Gen 15:5). The readers should not faint in their faith, for if they read the OT, they are reminded that God fulfills his promises, but he often does so at a time and in a place that one doesn’t expect. Abraham thought Ishmael was the fulfillment of the promise (Gen 17:15–21), but God fulfilled his promise by giving Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. The fulfillment came, however, when they least expected it. Still, at the end of the day, they believed God could and would do what he had pledged.

11:13

On the one hand God fulfills his promises. On the other hand the patriarchs died without seeing the promises fulfilled in their fullness. They had children but certainly not as many as the stars of the sky. They were “foreigners and temporary residents on the earth” (cf. Gen 23:4; cf. Ps 39:12; see §6), and yet they didn’t lament their social status but “confessed” that they didn’t live in the land as citizens but as exiles. The two terms for exiles here shouldn’t be distinguished in this context.⁵⁷³ The patriarchs didn’t die with cynicism and disbelief, even though they didn’t possess the land of Canaan.

⁵⁷² So Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 590.

⁵⁷³ L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 292.

Instead, they died in faith, as those who didn't receive the promises. Nevertheless, they "saw" (ιδόντες) the promises with the eyes of faith.⁵⁷⁴ They didn't shut their eyes to reality, for they recognized that the realization of the promises was "far away" (πόρρωθεν). They didn't pretend the promises were fulfilled, and yet they knew God was faithful.⁵⁷⁵ They "welcomed" (NIV, ἀσπασάμενοι) the promises, in the sense that they knew they would eventually come to pass. The author wants his readers to see the parallels. They may feel in their current distress that God isn't fulfilling his promises, but a long view reveals that God is always faithful to his word.

11:14

Those who acknowledge that they are sojourners and exiles and strangers on earth make clear that they are seeking a different "homeland" (πατρίδα). If their hope was on earth, they wouldn't long for a domicile that was heavenly. Again this is the word for the readers as well. Their inheritance is heavenly and eschatological. Currently they are resident aliens, and they are awaiting the inheritance to come.

11:15

The patriarchs demonstrated that they didn't long for any earthly land, for when they were exiles and sojourners in Canaan, they could have returned to the land of their origin. Abraham could have gone back to Ur or Haran, and he also stubbornly insisted that his servant never take Isaac back to such a place (Gen 24:6).⁵⁷⁶ Jacob could have stayed with Laban instead of returning to Canaan. Their actions indicated their devotion and commitment to the Lord. The readers, on the other hand, are tilting in the other direction. They are tempted to go back to Judaism to enjoy the comfort and security of this world. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire, and they may have been inclined to move in this direction to avoid

⁵⁷⁴ Bockmuehl rightly observes that faith does not glory in blindness per se. The point is that believers don't see now what God has promised, but they *see* from afar what he has promised by faith. See Markus Bockmuehl, "Abraham's Faith in Hebrews 11," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. Bauckham, D. R. Driver, T. A. Hart, and N. MacDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 369–71.

⁵⁷⁵ The author says in 6:15 that Abraham received the promise, but he referred there to the promise regarding Isaac, and here in Heb 11:13 the focus is on the promise of the land (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 329).

⁵⁷⁶ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 421.

persecution. Or perhaps they wanted tangible assurance that their sins were forgiven through the concrete and repeated activity of the Levitical cult. They may have justified such a move by saying they were returning to the faith of their fathers. But actually, according to the author, their ancestors didn't look backward but forward. They didn't put their trust in an earthly city but a heavenly one, and the readers should follow the example of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

11:16

The patriarchs were animated by new desires and were fueled with godly longings. They desired a “better” homeland. The word “better” (*κρείττονος*) plays a major role in Hebrews: Jesus is better than angels (1:4); Melchizedek is better than Abraham (7:7); Jesus brings in a “better hope” (7:19) and a “better covenant” (7:22; 8:6) because he offered “better sacrifices” (9:23); Jesus’ blood is “better” than Abel’s (12:24). And fitting with this verse in particular, believers anticipate a “better possession” (10:34), and OT saints a “better resurrection” (11:35) and “something better” along with new covenant believers (11:40). The better homeland is the “city” God has prepared for his people. God is the builder of this city (11:10), and it is a heavenly city (12:22). The earthly city of man forecasts a far better heavenly city, the city of God (13:14). In the same way John comforts his readers with the promise of the heavenly city to come (Rev 21:1–22:5).

The promise of a heavenly city is rooted in the OT where there are stunning promises for Jerusalem. We find prayers and promises regarding the future of Jerusalem (Pss 51:18; 122:6; 128:5; 137:5–6; 147:2; Isa 30:19; 33:20; 52:1, 9; Dan 9:25; Joel 3:1, 20; Zeph 3:16–17; Zech 1:14; 2:2, 4, 12; 8:4, 15; 9:9; 12:2–3, 6, 8–10), so that the Lord will “reign as king on Mount Zion in Jerusalem” (Isa 24:23). Jerusalem will be the center of the universe (Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2; cf. Jer 3:17; Zech 8:22; 14:16–17), holy (Isa 4:3–4; Joel 3:17; Zech 8:3), forgiven (Zech 13:10), comforted (Isa 66:13), safe (Jer 33:15; Zech 14:11–12), joyful (Isa 65:18), and blessed marvelously by God (Isa 62:1–12; Zech 1:17). What the OT says about the earthly Jerusalem is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem according to Hebrews. This fits with the earthly-heavenly pattern so often observed in Hebrews. And it also accords with the nature of typology in Hebrews, so that there is escalation from the earthly city to the heavenly city.

Since the ancestors longed for a heavenly homeland and city, and heaven is the residence of God, it is evident they longed for God more than they desired any of the things of this world. Since they longed for God in such a way, he is not ashamed to be called their God. Dwelling in God's presence is their greatest desire, and thus God is not ashamed to be identified as their God. Indeed, he has prepared for them a heavenly city so they may reside with him forever. The author commends the same for his readers. Their desires should not be for earthly comforts but God's heavenly presence, and they should recognize that if they endure in faith and hope until the end that God has prepared a city for them.

11:17

The author turns to one of the most significant events in the OT, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22). The author notes that God "tested" Abraham, and the narrative in Gen 22:1 begins with the words, "After these things God tested Abraham." Abraham received promises from God, which pledged to him land, offspring, and blessing (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:4-5, 16; 17:5-6, 15-21; 18:18; 21:10-12; 22:16-18). Central to these promises was the promise of offspring, and the texts cited above make clear that the promise would become a reality through Isaac, not Ishmael. In this sense Isaac was "the unique son" (τὸν μονογενῆ) of Abraham, or as the NIV puts it, his "one and only son." The promises couldn't be fulfilled, however, if Abraham sacrificed Isaac, for the promises couldn't be fulfilled through just any son of Abraham. They were guaranteed to *this son*, to Isaac. Hence, the Lord's command to Abraham didn't make much sense. It contradicted everything God had said. Nevertheless, Abraham trusted God by carrying out his instructions. Abraham had received the promises from God, and thus he did what God commanded, even though it contradicted what God had promised.

11:18

The author confirms that the promises were uniquely and exclusively given to Isaac. He cites Gen 21:12, and the citation matches the LXX exactly. Here we have the story where Sarah wants to evict Ishmael from the house because he was mocking and deriding Isaac (21:9-10). Abraham was grieved and didn't want to carry out his wife's command (Gen 21:11). God, however, confirmed Sarah's word. Abraham must follow her instruction, for the promise will

be given through Isaac, not Ishmael. Interestingly, Paul cites the identical account to make the same basic point in both Rom 9:7 and Gal 4:30. In Genesis 17, when the Lord promises Abraham and Sarah a son, Abraham isn't really interested (vv. 15–18). He was satisfied with the promise becoming a reality through Ishmael. But the Lord rejected Abraham's perspective. Though he promised to bless Ishmael, his covenant would be with and through Isaac alone (vv. 19–21). The promises, then, must be secured through Isaac, and yet God demanded that Abraham sacrifice him. If the readers are doubting God, if their circumstances make them wonder if they will receive the final reward, the author reminds them of Abraham's situation. It seemed as if God were contradicting and nullifying his own promise!

11:19

Faced with such a daunting situation, Abraham didn't doubt God's promise. He remained convinced that God would fulfill his promise *through Isaac*. By that point in his life, he had seen God's faithfulness in delivering him repeatedly. For instance God rescued his wife from the clutches of Pharaoh and Abimelech (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18). When Abraham trusted God and let Lot choose the “best” land for himself, Abraham actually got the better land, and Lot ended up in Sodom, which was destroyed (Genesis 13). When Abraham attempted to rescue Lot with a paltry number of men (318) against kings who had just won a major victory against many other kings, he succeeded (Gen 14:1–24). And most striking of all, God had given Abraham and Sarah the power to procreate. Isaac was their miracle child born long after the time of childbearing (Gen 17:14–17; 18:9–15; 21:1–7). So Abraham didn't doubt God's pledge that the promises would be fulfilled through Isaac. He was convinced that if he sacrificed Isaac, God would raise him from the dead and fulfill his promises through a miracle. The narrative in Genesis bears out this reading. We read in Gen 22:5, “Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we'll come back to you.’” The words of the narrative here are not incidental or accidental; they are included for a reason. Abraham was convinced that Isaac would return.⁵⁷⁷ Somehow and in some way God would fulfill his promise through Isaac.

⁵⁷⁷ Rightly Hughes, *Hebrews*, 484; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 424.

Isaac functions, then, as “an illustration” (*παραβολή*) or type or figure of the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.⁵⁷⁸ Abraham, so to speak, received Isaac back from the dead, but that event anticipated another Son and another Father. In the latter instance the Father actually handed over and sacrificed his Son, and the Son gladly and willingly gave his life for the salvation of his brothers and sisters (2:10–18). Those who obey God are always rewarded, and thus the Father raised his Son from the dead. Isaac’s return typologically points to and anticipates that greater resurrection. The readers, like Abraham, are called on to trust God, even when it looks as if everything conspires against the fulfillment of the promise. God’s word always comes true, even if it takes a resurrection to bring it to pass. For if God fulfilled his promise to Abraham and was faithful to Jesus, he would be faithful to them as well.

11:20

Faith looks to the future, trusting God that the future will turn out well because God is always faithful to his promises (see §7). The author considers Isaac’s blessing of both Jacob (Gen 27:27–29) and Esau (Gen 27:39–40). In both instances Isaac was confident God would fulfill his promises to them in the future. Isaac relied on the same promises as Abraham and was confident God would grant him offspring, land, and universal blessing in accord with the covenant he enacted with Abraham.

11:21

The future-oriented character of faith continues in Jacob’s life. Like Isaac, Jacob blessed his sons when he was old. In fact, Jacob was near death. But he didn’t view his death as a contradiction or refutation of God’s promises, for he prophesied about what God would do in the future in the life of Joseph’s sons (Gen 48:1–22). In the MT of Gen 47:31, Jacob gives thanks “at the head of his bed,” while in the LXX he worships at the top of his staff. Hebrews clearly follows the LXX here, quoting the exact words found there. It is possible to vocalize the Hebrew so the reference is actually to Jacob’s staff. On the other hand, there is evidence that Jacob was in fact in bed (Gen 48:2; 49:33). In either case the main point of the verse is the same: faith looks to the future and trusts in God’s promises.

⁵⁷⁸ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 363.

11:22

The faith of Joseph is similar to what is said about Isaac and Jacob. When we think about all that could be commented on in the life of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, it is remarkable that in every case the author reflects on what they said in their old age or when they were on their deathbed. He doesn't comment on anything these people *did* in their lives that manifested faith. Instead, he zeros in on what they *said*, and how they prophesied about the future when they were about to die. In every case they continued to believe in the promises at their death, even when it became apparent they wouldn't be fulfilled in their lifetimes. Joseph at his death (Gen 50:24–25) reminds his hearers about the promised exodus of Israel. God will deliver Israel from Egypt and bring them to Canaan, and Joseph wants his bones to be brought with them. Joseph is in effect saying that Egypt is not his home. Canaan is his home. The lesson for the Hebrews is clear. Like Joseph they should be looking forward to and trusting in what God will do in the future. He will certainly deliver his people. Furthermore, their home is not on earth. Even though Joseph was a ruler in Egypt, he recognized that he was an exile, that his true home was Canaan. So too, the readers should recognize that their true home is the heavenly city; and like Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph they should trust God's promises even in death.

Bridge

The author highlights here that faith trusts in God for the future. Abraham left Ur even when he didn't know where God was calling him to live. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob died without seeing the promises realized in their fullness, but they didn't mock the promises of God or dismiss them as fantasies. They trusted that God had a heavenly homeland for them, a heavenly city. So too, when the Lord summoned Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he didn't shrink back in unbelief. He continued to believe that God would fulfill his promises through Isaac and came to the conviction that God would raise him from the dead if need be. So too, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph on their deathbeds didn't see God's promises fulfilled; but they spoke about the future in confidence and faith, convinced God would do what he said. Faith trusts God for the future and believes, no matter how improbable it seems, that God will fulfill what he promised.

Hebrews 11:23–31

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)
- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:13)
- IV. Don't Fall Away from Jesus' Melchizedekian Priesthood Since It Is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14–10:18)
- V. **Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:19–12:29)**
 - A. Exhortation to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Help Others (10:19–25)
 - B. Warning: No Hope of Forgiveness for Those Who Turn from Christ (10:26–31)
 - C. **Call to Persevere in Faith (10:32–12:3)**
 1. Don't Abandon Confidence but Endure in Faith (10:32–39)
 2. **Description and Examples of Persevering Faith (11:1–12:3)**
 - a. Nature of Faith (11:1–2)
 - b. Creation Through Noah (11:3–7)
 - c. The Faith of Abraham and His Heirs (11:8–22)
 - d. **The Faith of Moses and Those Entering the Land (11:23–31)**
 - e. A Closing Catalog of Faith (11:32–40)
 - f. Run the Race Looking to Jesus as Supreme Exemplar of Faith (12:1–3)
 - D. Exhortations to Readers to Endure (12:4–29)

Scripture

²³By faith, after Moses was born, he was hidden by his parents for three months, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they didn't fear the king's edict.

²⁴By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter ²⁵and chose to suffer with the people of God rather than to enjoy the short-lived pleasure of sin.

²⁶For he considered the reproach because of the Messiah to be

greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, since his attention was on the reward.

²⁷ By faith he left Egypt behind, not being afraid of the king's anger, for Moses persevered as one who sees Him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he instituted the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch the Israelites. ²⁹ By faith they crossed the Red Sea as though they were on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to do this, they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after being encircled by the Israelites for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute received the spies in peace and didn't perish with those who disobeyed.

Context

As noted previously, 10:19 begins a long exhortation section in which the readers are exhorted to keep holding fast, to stay true to Christ, and to persevere in faith until the end so they receive the final reward (10:19–39). Chapter 11 provides illustrations of the faith that receives the final reward. We found in verses 3–7 that faith pleases God, that it sees what is invisible, and that those who exercise faith walk with God and are righteous before him. Verses 8–22 feature the future character of faith, focusing particularly on future promises of blessing that will be given to those who are the Lord's. Verses 23–31, on the other hand, emphasize that faith trusts in God even during suffering. Faith believes it will be rewarded, even if it is currently opposed by the world.

Faith in the midst of suffering is evident in the life of Moses. For example, Moses' parents courageously spared their child's life even when threatened by Pharaoh (v. 23). Moses could have enjoyed the luxury and privilege of being part of Pharaoh's household (v. 24), but he chose to suffer with the people of God instead of enjoying the temporary pleasures of this world (v. 25). He took such a stand because he looked to the future reward that awaited him (v. 26). So too, Moses showed faith in leaving Egypt despite the threats of Pharaoh (v. 27) and expressed his faith by observing the Passover to spare the firstborn in Israel (v. 28). Israel, when confronted by the danger of the Red Sea, crossed it by faith (v. 29), though the Egyptians were destroyed by it. Conquering Jericho was an impossible task, and the walled city was a great danger to Israel, but the walls of the city fell

when Israel put their trust in God (v. 30). Finally, Rahab demonstrated that she did not live for the sake of the city of man (Jericho) but for the city of God. She courageously welcomed the Israelite spies and escaped destruction herself (v. 31).

Exegesis

11:23

The author continues to rehearse examples of faith in the history of Israel. We are not surprised to discover that Moses is considered for several verses. The story summarized here follows closely Exod 2:2–3. At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh demanded that Hebrew boys be slain at birth by casting them into the Nile (Exod 1:22). Moses' parents, however, saw the beauty of their child and hid him for three months. What is perhaps most interesting is the author's comment on the story, for he concludes that Moses' parents "didn't fear the king's edict." I noted in the context section above that what links the accounts together in 11:23–31 is how people exercised faith when they were suffering. Presumably the author recounts this story because his readers were fearful of trusting in the Lord and of doing anything that might set them at cross purposes with authorities who could injure them, and thus he sets forth Moses' parents as an example of doing what was right when they would be prone to act in fear.

11:24

In verses 24–29 the faith of Moses himself takes center stage. Verses 24–27 consider Moses' faith that impelled him to align with the people of Israel, while verses 28–29 relate the faith that propelled him to lead Israel out of Egypt. Verse 24 considers the status of Moses. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:4–10). Growing up as a son of privilege, he enjoyed all the luxuries of life and the status of belonging to the first family in Egypt. Moses, however, didn't rely on his nobility or his stature. He trusted in God instead and renounced his claim as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

11:25

Moses' faith was not passive. He sided with Israel, with his people, over against the Egyptians. The author probably refers to Moses' slaying of the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew (Exod 2:11–12). Such an action, even if it was mistaken in some respects, wasn't merely a temporary fit of temper. It signaled

where Moses' loyalties were, demonstrating that he associated himself with the people of God rather than with the Egyptians. By siding with the Israelites, Moses renounced the pleasures and joys of Egypt with all its luxuries and comforts. The author acknowledges that sin may bring intense delight and pleasure. Still such pleasures are temporary and evanescent, and Moses recognized that the enjoyment of sin is fleeting.⁵⁷⁹

11:26

Moses' choice should not be considered ultimately as an example of self-denial. He considered the "reproach" (*ὀνειδισμόν*) he suffered for the sake of the Christ to be "greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt." The "wealth" was the "reward" (*μισθαποδοσίαν*) he would certainly receive in the future. Moses rejected temporary pleasures and looked to future and eternal riches instead. It is fascinating that the author says Moses suffered the reproach of the Christ since nothing is said about the Messiah in the story. According to NT writers, the promises of redemption and for a king in Israel find their fulfillment in Jesus himself. He is the prophet who is better than Moses (3:1–6; Deut 18:15–22). He is the king promised in the Pentateuch (Gen 17:6, 16; 35:11). The scepter promised to Judah belongs to Jesus (Gen 49:10), and he is the star from Jacob who carries the scepter (Num 24:17) and who will crush the enemies of the Lord (Num 24:17–18). We have already seen as well that the author can take the words of Psalm 102 that refer to the Lord and apply them to Jesus Christ (Heb 1:10–12). It seems that he does something similar here. The reproach Moses suffered for God's sake is attributed to Jesus Christ.

Referring to the reproach of Christ makes the story relevant for the readers as well. The author wants them to suffer for Christ's sake. He also wants them to be like Moses. He can understand and sympathize with their desire for the comforts of the present world. Persecution wasn't a pleasant prospect. The author observes that Moses didn't relish suffering either. The pleasures of sin are real, and following that pathway can bring remarkable delights. But such delights are temporary and fleeting. Far better to join Moses and to

⁵⁷⁹ L. Johnson argues that the reference is not to the temporary pleasures of sin but the temporary advantages of sin (*Hebrews*, 300). The word can have either meaning, and the overall meaning is not greatly affected in either case.

look to the future reward, a permanent reward that will bring happiness that will never be revoked.

11:27

Moses renounced the joys of Egyptian power and put to death the Egyptian abusing the Hebrew slave (Exod 2:11–12). He became fearful when it was clear that what he did was spreading round the country (Exod 2:14). Pharaoh, upon learning about the slaying, tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled to Midian (Exod 2:15). After reading Exodus, the author’s comments on the incident are puzzling, for he says that Moses was not “afraid of the king’s anger,” when it seems plain from Exodus that he was fearful. One way to solve the conundrum is if the leaving here refers to the later account of the exodus with all of Israel.⁵⁸⁰ On that occasion Moses left without fearing Pharaoh. Such a reading is possible, and it would solve our problem.⁵⁸¹ It is possible that the author refers to “a general category (the departure) that contains within it several specific incidents.”⁵⁸²

It is also possible the author refers to Moses’ departure after slaying the Egyptian (Exod 2:15). The chronological order in which the writer recounts the events supports this interpretation.⁵⁸³ If one adopts this reading, it is difficult to believe the author was unaware of Moses’ fear noted in Exod 2:14, for he is well acquainted with the OT and often cites it verbatim. The problem is similar in some ways to his putting the altar of incense inside the most holy place. Indeed, there is some recognition of fear in Hebrews, for otherwise a reason for Moses’ departure would be absent. If this interpretation is correct, perhaps the author suggests that Moses’ fear was not the ultimate reality in his life. Yes, he feared dying, but at a deeper level he trusted that God would protect him and that his life would be preserved. He persevered through his trial as if he saw the one who can’t be seen.⁵⁸⁴ The author desired the same for his readers.⁵⁸⁵ They

⁵⁸⁰ Westcott, *Hebrews*, 373.

⁵⁸¹ So O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 434; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 574–75.

⁵⁸² L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 302 (though Johnson doesn’t endorse this view as necessarily correct).

⁵⁸³ So Bruce, *Hebrews*, 321–22; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 497–500.

⁵⁸⁴ In defense of a qualitative reading of the participle “sees” (ὡς ὁρῶν), see O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 434.

⁵⁸⁵ Lane suggests that Moses overcame his initial fear and trusted in God’s unseen promises (*Hebrews* 9–13, 375).

should see that the unseen one was protecting them, that just as he preserved Moses from danger, so he will preserve them. The author doesn't promise that they will escape death as Moses did. He pledges instead that they will receive the final and better reward even if they surrender their lives.

11:28

The Passover, of course, is one of the signature events in Israelite history (Exodus 12). The Lord put to death all the firstborn in Egypt (Exod 11:5–6; 12:12, 29–30), but he “passed over” and spared those who applied the blood of a lamb to their house (Exod 12:13, 22–23). The Passover celebration commemorates Israel's liberation from Egypt, signifying their day of freedom. Observing the Passover was an act of faith on Moses' part. He trusted God regarding both judgment and redemption. By trusting God and applying the Passover blood, the firstborn in Israel escaped destruction.

11:29

Israel was frightened when, upon fleeing from Egypt, they came face-to-face with the Red Sea (Exod 14:3–13). The Egyptians regretted letting them go and now pursued them with vengeance. The Lord then dried up the sea, and Israel walked through on dry ground (Exod 14:16, 21–22, 29). When the Egyptians followed after them, the waters surged over them, and they perished (Exod 14:23–28). Israel risked its life going into the Red Sea, but they did so because they believed the Lord would rescue them and he would fight for them against the Egyptians (Exod 14:14). The readers, like the Israelites and like Moses (Exod 14:15), were fearful, and yet if they would trust in the Lord, they would be delivered.

11:30

From Israel's escape and redemption from Egypt, the author moves to the first battle in the conquest: the battle of Jericho (Joshua 6). The battle plan was singularly strange. Israel was to march around the city for six days (Josh 6:3, 6–14). On the seventh day Israel was instructed to march around the city seven times, and while doing so, the priests were to blow on trumpets (Josh 6:4, 15–16). At the end of the march, they were called on to give a loud shout at the “prolonged blast of the horn” (Josh 6:5, 20). The wall collapsed and then Israel took the city. Joshua says nothing about the people's faith in taking the city, but following such an unorthodox

battle plan evidenced the faith of Israel, for no one conquers enemies with such a “military strategy.”

11:31

The destruction of Jericho is intertwined with the story of Rahab’s preservation. When the Israelite spies came to Jericho, Rahab hid them from the men of Jericho and informed them how they could escape safely (Joshua 2), and thus Rahab and all who were in her house were spared when the city was destroyed (Josh 6:22–25). It was never forgotten that Rahab was a prostitute, but she was a prostitute who was delivered from her evil, for she trusted in the Lord and gave herself to him. We have a hint here that a sordid past does not preclude one from enjoying forgiveness and a future reward. Her faith manifested itself in believing in the Lord’s word (Josh 2:9–11) and in sending away the spies in peace. Rahab is another person who trusted in the Lord in a time of danger. How improbable it seemed that a ragtag army could defeat the walled city of Jericho, and yet Rahab exposed herself to danger in concealing the spies. Mosser may be right in seeing Rahab as the climactic example in chapter 11.⁵⁸⁶ She represents someone who was willing to leave her own society and culture and to align herself with the people of God. In other words she functions as a model for the readers since she was willing to go “outside the camp” (13:13) and to suffer the reproach of being identified with the people of God.

Bridge

Whether it was Moses’ parents, Moses himself, the battle of Jericho, or Rahab, we see that faith considers God trustworthy in a time of danger. Faith recognizes that God will deliver and rescue his own, just as he rescued Moses from Pharaoh, Israel at the Red Sea, Israel at the battle of Jericho, and Rahab from the leaders in Jericho. Faith takes risks and ventures on God. It doesn’t look to society and culture for approval. It trusts in the word of the Lord instead of finding its delight in a life of sin. We again see here the future character of faith. When Moses and Israel and Rahab put their trust in the Lord, they had not yet seen what he would do. Faith came first

⁵⁸⁶ See Carl Mosser, “Rahab Outside the Camp,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. R. Bauckham, D. R. Driver, T. A. Hart, and N. MacDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 384–404.

and deliverance later. That was the situation of the readers as well. They were not part of the inner circle of society. They were verbally abused and discriminated against. Perhaps worse sufferings would follow. They wanted to enjoy the security and comfort of belonging. The author summons them to trust in God, believing he would deliver them and bring them to the heavenly city.

Hebrews 11:32–40

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)
- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:13)
- IV. Don't Fall Away from Jesus' Melchizedekian Priesthood Since It Is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14–10:18)
- V. **Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:19–12:29)**
 - A. Exhortation to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Help Others (10:19–25)
 - B. Warning: No Hope of Forgiveness for Those Who Turn from Christ (10:26–31)
 - C. **Call to Persevere in Faith (10:32–12:3)**
 1. Don't Abandon Confidence but Endure in Faith (10:32–39)
 2. **Description and Examples of Persevering Faith (11:1–12:3)**
 - a. Nature of Faith (11:1–2)
 - b. Creation Through Noah (11:3–7)
 - c. The Faith of Abraham and His Heirs (11:8–22)
 - d. The Faith of Moses and Those Entering the Land (11:23–31)
 - e. **A Closing Catalog of Faith (11:32–40)**
 - f. Run the Race Looking to Jesus as Supreme Exemplar of Faith (12:1–3)
 - D. Exhortations to Readers to Endure (12:4–29)

Scripture

³² And what more can I say? Time is too short for me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, ³³ who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength after being weak, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead—they were raised to life again. Some men were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection, ³⁶ and others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment.

³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. ³⁸ The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.

Context

The great faith chapter appears in the midst of an exhortation section (10:19–12:29) where the author encourages the readers to continue believing until the end and not to fall away (10:19–39). The heroes of faith are introduced so the readers will imitate them and continue believing until the end (11:1–40). Faith is assured that God's promises will be realized even if they are not visible to the human eye (11:1–2). Faith trusts God for the future, and those who believe live in a way that is pleasing to God (11:3–7). Verses 8–22 particularly emphasize that faith looks to God for one's future reward. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob trusted God's promises even when it seemed humanly impossible for them to be fulfilled. In verses 23–31 the future character of faith continues to be underlined, but here the author emphasizes the centrality of faith when life is difficult.

In the last section of chapter 11, the author realizes the list could keep going on forever, so now he summarizes the rest of the OT and later Jewish tradition (vv. 32–40). In verses 32–35a he focuses on the great exploits of those who exercised faith. The text turns a corner in verses 35b–38, for here the sufferings and afflictions of

those who believed are rehearsed. Verses 39–40 consider the whole chapter and the relationship between the ancestors in faith and the readers. There is a framing device in that the author returns to the introduction in 11:2, which affirms that the ancestors were approved because of their faith (11:39). Still they did not receive what was promised. Their faith was forward looking. Believers of the present age, after the cross and resurrection, have “something better,” and the ancestors were not perfected apart from NT believers (11:40).

Exegesis

11:32

The words “And what more can I say?” signal that the writer could keep going, but he has abbreviated what he could say. After all, he has stopped with Rahab, and he could have appealed to many more characters in the OT. He recognizes that time and space preclude a detailed exposition. The author lists some of those who could serve as examples of faith, but he doesn’t list them in chronological order, for Barak (Judges 4–5) precedes Gideon (Judges 6–8), and Jephthah (Judges 11–12) precedes Samson (Judges 13–16), and Samuel (1 Samuel 1–28) precedes David (1 Samuel 16–2 Samuel 24). Perhaps the writer lists first in every instance the character whom he considered to be more significant. The category “prophets” includes many persons, showing that the discussion could go on for a long time indeed.

One of the striking features of the list is the weakness and sins of those identified as people of faith. Barak wasn’t courageous enough to go to battle without Deborah (Judg 4:8). Asking for signs demonstrated Gideon’s lack of faith (Judg 6:36–40), and he also made an ephod that catapulted Israel to sin (Judg 8:24–27). Samson’s sexual infidelities and impulsive acts are infamous (Judges 13–16). Jephthah foolishly vowed to sacrifice his own daughter (11:30–31, 34–40). It is harder to find blemishes in Samuel, but his sons didn’t turn out well, and he appointed them as judges anyway (1 Sam 8:1–3). David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Still it is not the sins and faults of these men that are remembered (he doesn’t mention the faults of any of them!) but their faith and trust in God, showing that perseverance in faith for the author is not the same thing as perfection. Indeed one may sin dramatically and still persevere in faith. We think of Samson as an

example here. The narrator in Judges suggests that the Lord had not abandoned him, despite his dalliance with Delilah, for we are told “his hair began to grow back after it had been shaved” (Judg 16:22). And when Samson put his hands on the pillars, he could do nothing if the Lord were not with him (Judg 16:25–30). The story of Delilah illustrates that when the Lord wasn’t with him he was useless. Samson died trusting in the Lord, despite all his foibles.

11:33

Faith trusts in what cannot be seen, but it produces effects in the real world. Faith shows up and manifests itself in concrete ways. Hence faith conquers “kingdoms.” He has in mind the victory of Barak over Sisera (Judges 4–5) and Gideon’s faith to triumph over Midian when his army was incredibly small and the odds of victory were against him (Judges 6–8). In addition Jephthah triumphed over the Ammonites (Judges 11–12), Samson performed many exploits against the Philistines (Judges 13–16), and Samuel won a significant victory over the Philistines (1 Samuel 7). David, of course, won many battles both as a warrior and as the king of Israel.

Administering “justice” (δικαιοσύνη) was the responsibility of the judges and of kings. The judges weren’t kings, but judges like Samuel were responsible to see that what was right and true was practiced in Israel. David, as king, particularly had that responsibility, for one of the main functions of leaders was to see that justice was done in Israel (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Chr 8:14).⁵⁸⁷

The promises given to these men focused especially on victory over their enemies. Barak was promised victory over Sisera’s forces (Judg 4:6–7). The angel of the Lord promised Gideon that he would triumph over Midian (Judg 6:12–16). Promises were made that Samson would begin to save Israel from the Philistines (Judg 13:5). David received many promises, including being anointed as king (1 Sam 16:13) and receiving the promise of a dynasty (2 Samuel 7).⁵⁸⁸

Another exploit was shutting “the mouths of lions.” Samson tore apart a lion with his bare hands (Judg 14:6–7). David slew lions threatening his flock (1 Sam 17:34–36). Most strikingly lions

⁵⁸⁷ David may be particularly in view here (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 348).

⁵⁸⁸ God’s relationship with Israel began with the promises made to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3, etc.).

did not tear Daniel apart when he was cast into the den with them (Daniel 6, see esp. 6:19). Faith trusts in God's promises in risky and dangerous situations.

11:34

Others “quenched” flames of fire. The reference is to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who defied Nebuchadnezzar and refused to bow down to his statue (Daniel 3). When they were thrown into the fire, the fire did not burn even a hair of their heads, and they were confident that God would deliver them from Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:16–18). Escaping the sword, being mighty in war, and putting foreign armies to flight fit many narratives in the OT where Israel or individuals triumphed over their enemies. Threats to the lives of Elijah and Elisha were not realized (1 Kgs 19:2; 2 Kgs 6:31–32; cf. Jer 36:26). Often the point of the accounts is that God's people conquered in spite of their weaknesses. For instance, Gideon triumphed despite his frailty (Judges 6–7). The Lord often put his people in desperate situations so they would trust in him rather than themselves. There are many incidents in the OT where those in Israel became mighty in war and conquered foreign armies, including Joshua, Barak, Gideon, and David. The application for the readers of the letter is clear.

11:35

In two instances women received their sons back from the dead. Elijah raised from the dead the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kgs 17:17–23), and Elisha raised the Shunammite's son after he died (2 Kgs 4:18–36).

After recounting the great exploits and victories won through faith, the author turns toward those who kept trusting God in the midst of suffering.⁵⁸⁹ Some were tortured because of their allegiance to God. They did not, as the NLT puts it, “turn from God in order to be set free” (ἀπολύτρωσιν). The author probably has in mind here the torture of Eleazar that led to his death (2 Macc 6:18–31). Also, seven brothers and a mother were tortured “with whips and thongs” (2 Macc 7:1 NRSV).⁵⁹⁰ “The tongue of their spokesman” was “cut out.” They “scalp[ed] him and cut off his hands and feet” (2 Macc 7:4). He was then fried in a pan (2 Macc 7:5). They also scalped the

⁵⁸⁹ For the honor/shame theme, here see deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 195–202.

⁵⁹⁰ All references to 2 Maccabees are from the NRSV.

second brother (2 Macc 7:7). And the remaining brothers and mother were tortured and put to death (2 Macc 7:8–42). Torture, however, is not the last word. Those who suffer for God’s sake will be raised to life again (7:9, 14, 36). Those who suffer for God’s sake receive “a better resurrection” (*κρείττονος ἀναστάσεως*). The word “better” reveals the author’s typological argument. The resurrection is “better” than that received by the sons raised from the dead by Elijah and Elisha. These boys, after all, died again, but their resurrection points to a better and permanent resurrection, a resurrection to a life that never ends.⁵⁹¹ The readers of the letter had not yet experienced death for Christ (12:4), but if they were put to death and tortured for Christ’s sake, they too should look to the reward so they would receive “a better resurrection.”

11:36

Still others were mocked and scourged. The words of the prophets were mocked and scorned and ignored repeatedly (2 Chr 36:15–16; cf. 2 Chr 30:10). Jeremiah was “beaten” and put in “stocks” (Jer 20:2; cf. 37:15). Still others were imprisoned (cf. Jer 37:14–21). King Asa imprisoned the prophet Hanani when he rebuked him for not trusting in the Lord (2 Chr 16:7–10), and King Ahab imprisoned Micaiah for prophesying his death (1 Kgs 22:26–27). All these suffered in faith, trusting in the Lord’s promises despite their afflictions.

11:37

The list of sufferings continues. Some were stoned to death because of their devotion to the Lord. Zechariah was put to death by stoning for rebuking the people (2 Chr 24:20–21; cf. 1 Kgs 21:13; Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34). According to tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt.⁵⁹² Others were sawn in two, and according to Jewish tradition this was the fate of Isaiah (*Mart. Ascen. Isa.* 5:11–14). Others were put to death with the sword (cf. 1 Kgs 19:10; Jer 26:23). The clothing of the people of God (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8) signifies their poverty and being forsaken by society. They were poor, “persecuted, tormented” (NRSV; cf. 1 Kgs 18:4, 13; Neh 9:26, 30; Amos 2:12; 7:10–17).

⁵⁹¹ So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 350.

⁵⁹² For the sources see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 350n74.

11:38

The righteous, the readers are reminded, are often despised by the world, and the world “was not worthy” of such people, showing their unworthiness by their mistreatment and rejection of those who put their trust in the Lord. Some wandered in deserts, such as Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 19:4; 2 Kgs 2:8) and those recorded in Maccabees (1 Macc 2:29, 31; 5:24; 9:33, 62; 2 Macc 5:27). The godly sometimes had to flee evil by hiding in caves, just as many prophets were hidden by Obadiah (1 Kgs 18:4, 13), and David hid in a cave from his enemies (1 Sam 22:1; cf. also 2 Macc 6:11; 10:6). Similarly, Israel hid from the Philistines after Saul became king (1 Sam 13:6; cf. 1 Sam 14:11). If the readers expect to be accepted and praised, they need to rethink matters in light of the OT. The people of God have always been a minority people, a pilgrim people, and often despised and forsaken.

11:39

The author returns to the theme of 11:2. God approved the OT saints commended here on account of their faith. Their faith sustained them in good times and bad, in prosperity and suffering. Old Testament saints put their faith in “what was promised” (*ἐπαγγελίαν*), and yet they did not receive the promise. Remarkably they didn’t cease believing, even though the promise was not fulfilled. They experienced the fulfillment of some specific promises (11:11, 33), but they didn’t obtain the ultimate fulfillment of the promise.⁵⁹³ They recognized that they must wait for the fullness of the promise, that the promise would be realized eschatologically. The promise here is another way of speaking of the final inheritance (cf. “inherit the promises” and “heirs of the promise,” 6:12, 17), and in 9:15 it is defined as “the eternal inheritance.”⁵⁹⁴ Similarly the promise is understood as the eschatological rest (4:1), as the realization of final salvation (10:36), and as the coming of the kingdom (12:26, 28).

11:40

God ordained that OT believers would not be perfected apart from NT believers. Despite the remarkable faith of the OT saints, something “better” would only come with the new covenant. The something “better” arrived with Jesus’ death and resurrection, with

⁵⁹³ So Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 156.

⁵⁹⁴ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 392.

the final cleansing of sins through him.⁵⁹⁵ Hence, now that Christ has come, those who trust in Jesus have experienced something better even now.⁵⁹⁶ This stands in contrast to the notion that the author limits perfection to the final consummation in the heavenly city.⁵⁹⁷ Instead the perfection described here shouldn't be equated with the eschatological promise of verse 39. The believer's perfection in the present evil age functions as a guarantee that the promise of the heavenly city will be realized in the future.⁵⁹⁸ According to Peterson, perfection refers to the "totality of Christ's work," including both present forgiveness and final salvation.⁵⁹⁹ Ribbens may be more precise in saying that perfection refers to access to God.⁶⁰⁰ Old covenant saints didn't have full and free access to God apart from the sacrifice of Christ, which has opened the way for new covenant believers who now have a cleansed conscience through Christ's work.

Bridge

Faith trusts God in triumphs and tragedies, in the highs and lows of life. Faith gives itself entirely to God. If he ordains victory through faith, as he did through many of the judges and David, faith rejoices in the goodness God gives. If there is torture, death, and suffering, faith holds on to God, knowing that a "better resurrection" is coming and that the pain and torment of the present world will not last. The readers are called upon to imitate those who have gone before them and to entrust themselves to God. Those who trust God will receive the promise, and the ultimate promise is the resurrection itself.

Hebrews 12:1–3

Outline

- I. Prologue: Definitive and Final Revelation in the Son (1:1–4)
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He Is Greater than Angels (1:5–2:18)

⁵⁹⁵ So Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 598–600.

⁵⁹⁶ Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 156–57.

⁵⁹⁷ So Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 393.

⁵⁹⁸ Rightly Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*, 156–57.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶⁰⁰ Ribbens, "Levitical Sacrifice and Heavenly Cult in Hebrews," 296–97.

- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest Greater than Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13)
- IV. Don't Fall Away from Jesus' Melchizedekian Priesthood Since It Is Greater than the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-10:18)
- V. **Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:19-12:29)**
 - A. Exhortation to Draw Near, Hold Fast, and Help Others (10:19-25)
 - B. Warning: No Hope of Forgiveness for Those Who Turn from Christ (10:26-31)
 - C. **Call to Persevere in Faith (10:32-12:3)**
 - 1. Don't Abandon Confidence but Endure in Faith (10:32-39)
 - 2. **Description and Examples of Persevering Faith (11:1-12:3)**
 - a. Nature of Faith (11:1-2)
 - b. Creation Through Noah (11:3-7)
 - c. The Faith of Abraham and His Heirs (11:8-22)
 - d. The Faith of Moses and Those Entering the Land (11:23-31)
 - e. A Closing Catalog of Faith (11:32-40)
 - f. **Run the Race Looking to Jesus as Supreme Exemplar of Faith (12:1-3)**
 - D. Exhortations to Readers to Endure (12:4-29)

Scripture

¹Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, ²keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne. ³For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart.

Context

The main point of the entire letter-sermon is this: don't fall away from Jesus. The readers must hold fast (10:19-25) and must not let go (10:26-31). They must not abandon their confidence but

continue to believe to receive the final reward (10:32–29). The faith chapter (ch. 11) sketches in what persevering faith looks like. Faith relies on God’s promises, believing what he says even if it can’t see how they will be fulfilled. Faith looks to the future, banking on the word of God instead of taking its cue from present circumstances. Faith trusts God in danger and distress, knowing he will reward his own. OT ancestors serve as great exemplars of faith, but the supreme example is Jesus himself. As chapter 12 opens, the author applies what he says about OT heroes of faith (see the “therefore,” *Τοιγαροῦν*) to his readers, urging them to run the race with endurance and to lay aside every weight and sin in the race (12:1). The author moves from examples to exhortation.⁶⁰¹ They should keep their eyes on Jesus since he endured the suffering of the cross to obtain the reward of sitting at God’s right hand (12:2). By considering the hostility directed against Jesus, they won’t grow weary and give up as they run the race (12:3).

Exegesis

12:1

The first word, “therefore” (*Τοιγαροῦν*), indicates, along with the context, that the author now draws an application from the ancestors of faith in chapter 11. He did not compose the chapter for historical purposes but to motivate the readers of the letter. He encourages the readers to consider the cloud of witness who preceded them and to run the race with endurance until the end, shedding any obstacle and sin that hinders them in the race.

The OT ancestors are described as “a large cloud of witnesses.” They are witnesses in the sense that they function as examples for the readers; “the emphasis . . . falls on what Christians see in the host of witnesses, rather than on what they see in Christians.”⁶⁰² But it is probably also the case that they are conceived of as spectators as well. They witness by their lives, and they “cheer on” those who are in the race.⁶⁰³ Indeed the word “witnesses” (*μαρτύρων*) is related

⁶⁰¹ Cf. O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 448.

⁶⁰² O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 451.

⁶⁰³ See especially here the evidence presented by N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–3 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context*, SNTSMS 98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58–62. Koester says both notions are present. Those who have gone before are witnesses by their lives,

to the words “gained approval” (from *μαρτυρέω*), which are used in 11:2, 39 as a framework for the chapter. They witness to the readers by their faith and perseverance, and the readers should follow the train of their example. The author emphasizes the large number of witnesses. Perhaps he does so to impress on the readers that many have run the race before them. They are not alone or the only ones to suffer and endure. The ancestors of faith, as 11:32 demonstrates, were more than could be counted.

The main command, found at the end of the verse, fits with the purpose of the letter as a whole. The readers must “run the race” set before them with perseverance until the end. The ancestors of faith listed in chapter 11 kept running the race when it looked as if they wouldn’t triumph and despite suffering and opposition. The middle clause of the verse explains *how* the race is to be run. The readers must “throw off everything that hinders” (NIV) them. Possibly the author refers here to sin that impedes believers as they run the race.⁶⁰⁴ Or, alternatively, the author does not refer to sin but to things that may be good in and of themselves, and yet they prevent one from running the race.⁶⁰⁵ Probably the author refers generally to anything that can hinder us in a race, whether it is sin or other things in our lives which, though not evil in themselves, can hinder us as we run with perseverance.

Believers should also put off “sin that so easily entangles.” The word for “entangles” (*εὐπερίστατον*) has the idea that sin easily ensnares and trips believers up as they run the race.⁶⁰⁶ The author recognizes the power and attractiveness of sin. The Christian life is not easy; it takes strength and discipline, just as ardor and determination are needed to run a race.

as those who give approval, and as spectators (*Hebrews*, 522). Cf. also Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 602–3. Lane emphasizes the witness of their lives (*Hebrews* 9–13, 408).

⁶⁰⁴ So Attridge, *Hebrews*, 355; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 638.

⁶⁰⁵ So L. Johnson, *Hebrews*, 316–17.

⁶⁰⁶ The variant reading “easily distracting” (*εὐπερίσπαστον*, Ψ^{46} and 1739) is clearly secondary (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 638–39; but see Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 398–99). The word “easily ensnares” (*εὐπερίστατον*) occurs only here in the NT, but it is surely original. For the meaning supported by the HCSB, see Hughes (*Hebrews*, 520n11) and most commentators.

12:2

The main admonition is found in verse 1. Believers must run the race with endurance, which is just another way of saying they must persevere to the end. The author then tells them *how* to run the race. First, he says in verse 1 that they must lay aside every hindrance to running well, i.e., the sin which can trip believers up in the race. Second, they run with endurance by “keeping [their] eyes on Jesus.” Jesus is the supreme exemplar of faith, and believers will be motivated to continue their journey if they look to him.

Jesus is described as “the source and perfecter of our faith” (τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν). The word rendered “source” (ἀρχηγὸν) by the HCSB is translated various ways: “founder” (ESV); “pioneer” (NIV, NRSV, NET), and; “champion” (NLT). Jesus is the pathfinder for faith, functioning as an example, which also accords with 2:10. Such an interpretation certainly fits the context here where Jesus is set forth as the supreme exemplar.⁶⁰⁷ It seems, however, that the translations of the HCSB and ESV are also fitting.⁶⁰⁸ The pairing of the word with “perfecter” suggests that both words should be read together so the verse teaches both that Jesus is the exemplar of faith and that he also initiates and completes the faith of believers.⁶⁰⁹ As Lindars says, Jesus perfects their faith “because he enables those who hold fast to the Christian profession to reach the same goal.”⁶¹⁰ The author encourages believers, reminding them that the one who was the source and originator of their faith will also complete and perfect it.

Still the main point here is Jesus’ example to believers. The believers are to run the race to the end, just as Jesus completed his course.⁶¹¹ He endured the suffering and shame of the cross. The shame of the cross was proverbial in the ancient world.⁶¹² He was fortified to bear up under the agony of such a death on account of “the joy that lay before him.” Hence he could scorn and despise

⁶⁰⁷ Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 411–12.

⁶⁰⁸ See also the commentary on 2:10.

⁶⁰⁹ So also Attridge, *Hebrews*, 356–57; Koester, *Hebrews*, 523; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 640; Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith*, 96–101.

⁶¹⁰ Lindars, *The Theology of Hebrews*, 45.

⁶¹¹ For the importance of athletic imagery in chapter 12 and its background in the Greco-Roman world, see Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 40–70.

⁶¹² See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

the temporary shame, acting bravely since he knew something far better was coming.⁶¹³ Jesus' despising the shame means "a rejection of regard for one's reputation, and would include a corresponding negative counter-evaluation of those who would seek to judge one's actions as disgraceful."⁶¹⁴ Jesus was rewarded for his obedience with the reign at God's right hand. The author picks up again one of the central themes of the book. The prophecy of Ps 110:1 is fulfilled in Jesus who is seated at the right hand of God, reigning over all (cf. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12). Just as Moses renounced the temporary pleasures of sin for the sake of the reward that lay before him (11:24–26), so too Jesus endured the cross for the reward.⁶¹⁵ The cross was despised in the ancient world and a shameful way to die. The application to the readers is clear. They too must endure to the end, being willing to endure any suffering since they know they will ultimately enjoy a great reward.

12:3

Jesus' role as an example continues to be expanded upon. The readers must run the race to the end by looking at Jesus who endured the cross. The readers are urged to consider Jesus, and again his endurance is featured, which is just what the readers need as well. Jesus faced remarkable "hostility" (*ἀντιλογία*) of sinners against himself. Probably the author alludes to a similar hostility which the readers experienced, so he calls upon them to consider their brother (2:10–18; 4:14–16) and Lord who was not exempt from the same opposition by sinners. The author is concerned that the readers will "grow weary and lose heart." By considering what Jesus suffered, they will have a fresh resolve in a world that remains unfriendly and opposed. Giving up is another way of describing apostasy. It is the converse to enduring to the end, and Jesus endured by looking to the ultimate reward.

⁶¹³ For the notion that despising the shame means to be brave or unafraid, see Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 414.

⁶¹⁴ deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 172.

⁶¹⁵ For this interpretation see Hughes, *Hebrews*, 523–24n117; Koester, *Hebrews*, 523–24; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 455–56; deSilva, *Despising Shame*, 173–78; Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 177–85. Hence the writer is not saying Jesus endured the cross instead of grasping the joys that life on earth bring (against Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 399–400). Even if one adopted Lane's view, the central affirmation of the verse still fits with the message of Hebrews. On this reading believers must not pursue earthly joys now but endure suffering in light of the final reward promised.

Bridge

Believers are in a race, which is hard and difficult and long, and they must run it to the end to receive the prize. They are not alone in the race. Many (see chapter 11) have run it before them. They must throw everything off that hinders them in the race. Jesus is the supreme example for believers, for he endured to the end in his race, suffering agony and the opposition of those who hated him. But he was rewarded for his obedience and endurance, for he now reigns at the right hand of God. So too, the readers must be willing to suffer with Jesus and for him. Jesus is the source of their faith and the one who perfects their faith, but at the same time believers should continue to believe and to keep their eyes on Jesus. The race won't last forever, and knowing there is a great reward ahead should motivate them to keep running.