

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
Faith's Hall of Fame, Part 2
Hebrews 11

Several years ago I had the opportunity of visiting Africa for the very first time. While there, I saw the some of the results of the faith of Robert and Mary Moffat, Scottish pioneer missionaries to South Africa in the 19th Century. For ten years they labored in an area now called Botswana with no conversions. Not one single person came to Christ. The mission board began to question the wisdom of keeping them there. But by faith, Robert and Mary were convinced God was going to break through.

One day, a friend in England sent word that she wanted to mail them a gift and asked what they would like. Mary Moffat replied, "Send us a communion set; I'm sure it will soon be needed." God honored that woman's faith. The communion set was delayed in the mail, but on the very day before the first celebration of the Lord's Supper, it arrived. Soon a little group of six converts united to form the first Christian church in that land.¹

Hebrews 11 reminds us that faith is "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Augustine once said, "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe." Contrary to their experience and human reasoning, Robert and Mary Moffatt believed what they did not yet see. And their reward was to see what they had believed.

What characterizes people of faith? Last week we looked at four characteristics. First of all, *they are people like you and me*. The step of believing a great God to do great things is not shut up to the spiritually elite. You don't have to read far into Hebrews 11 to realize that these so-called "heroes of the faith" are pockmarked by the same sinful struggles that you and I experience.

Secondly, *these people have diverse life experiences*. You can't put them in a box. They don't all look alike, talk alike, walk alike or die alike. Able was viciously murdered; but Enoch was gloriously raptured! But both were commended for their faith.

Thirdly, we saw that these people *were obedient to God in the face of unbelievable odds*. In so many instances, just like Robert and Mary Moffatt, they acted by faith which was counter-intuitive. Faith preceded fruit! Faith also precedes funds (more about that later!).

Lastly, they believed God would reward in the future their obedience in the present. They had their eyes of faith firmly fixed on the heavenly country that God had promised. This 'ole earth was not their home; they were just a passin' through. This enabled them to old lightly any earthly possession, for they were looking forward to a kingdom that could not be shaken.

Today we want to continue our look at what characterizes people of faith. We obviously can't cover every characteristic; there are just too many. But here's one that you may not have thought of: People of faith...

...often emerge from households of faith.

In Hebrews 11 there are 16 heroes of faith mentioned by name. Of these, the vast majority come out of a God-fearing family. Now there are exceptions to this. Abraham, one of the best known heroes of faith, came from a family that worshipped other gods, specifically Nanna, the moon god (Josh. 24:2). And Rahab, of course, was a Gentile prostitute, and was most likely a worshipper of Baal. Both Abraham and Rahab remind us that God does intervene in families where there is not biblical heritage, calling children to be people of faith.

Often, however, people of faith do emerge from households of faith. Enoch, for example, mentioned in verse 5 came from the godly life of Seth. This Enoch, by the way, is not the Enoch of Genesis chapter 4, but rather the Enoch of Genesis chapter 5. The Enoch of Genesis 4 was the son of Cain, who had murdered Abel. But the Enoch of Genesis 5 is in the godly line of Seth.ⁱⁱ

Or take the example of Moses in verse 23: “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict” (Hebrews 11:23). The faith of Moses’ parents was contagious. It was probably caught more than it was taught. And it prepared Moses for the steps of faith that God would call him to take in leading the people of God.

So many of these people of faith in Hebrews 11 “sucked in godliness along with their mother’s milk.” Parents, the nurture of faith begins in the household. Dads, the nurture of faith in your children begins with you taking the role of spiritual leader within your family. Don’t balk at the tests of faith that God brings along your way. Your children are watching...and learning.

My own father was very imperfect. There’s a certain dose of dysfunction in the most godly of families. But one thing I’m so thankful for is the faith that was so often exhibited and modeled in my father’s life. Though imperfectly, he lived what he believed. To this very day I am motivated to daily spend time in personal devotion, prayer and the study of God’s Word because I saw that modeled in real life. I’ll never forget early one morning getting up to watch my favorite Saturday morning cartoons. I jumped out of bed, threw on my robe, and made dash for the den with every intention of turning on our black-and-white TV of those days and catching the first of a series of Saturday favorites. But as I threw open the door to the den, I was stopped dead in my tracks. There was my Dad on his knees in prayer. He never looked up, he never said a word...just silence. But he wasn’t asleep, just engaged in the most important business of the day...praying for his family, for his church...praying for me.

Now I’m not saying that as a result I’m a person of great faith. But I can say that what I saw modeled in the home has left an indelible impact on my life, and on the lives of his grandchildren. Faith, when modeled is contagious. And what better place to model real, live, vibrant faith than in the family.

That’s why people of faith leave a legacy. Do you want your life to have an ongoing impact on future generations? Nurture faith and the concrete expressions of faith in your life. Hebrews 11:4 says of Abel that “he still speaks, though he is dead.” So many people, even believers, these days are worried about leaving an inheritance, or money, or material possessions to their descendents. What about an example of faith? You see, when you live a life of faith, death will not terminate your impact on others. You will be like an Abel, whose life still speaks. You will be like the many mentioned in Hebrews 11, whose lives still speak to us today.

Something else about people of faith...

...they turn away from the temptations of this life.

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. Hebrews 11:23-27

Moses' example must have been an encouragement to these Hebrew Christians. Many were struggling with the temptation to pull away from the Body of Christ and their association with God's people. They were facing testing. Persecution was on the horizon. They had some hard decisions to make. Would they continue to gather with believers, and by this identify themselves as Christ-followers? Or would they shrink back and pursue their own safety and pleasure.

Have you ever noticed how testing can be an occasion for temptation? Testing and temptation are often two sides of the same coin. God allows testing to develop our faith. Satan brings temptation to destroy our faith. What God allows as a testing to draw us closer to himself, Satan uses as a temptation to move us away from God. We must always be aware of this and never allow our testings to move us into the allure of temptation.

“He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.” What about you? Do you consider disgrace for the sake of Christ of greater value than the pleasures and treasures of this life? That's an odd comparison, isn't it? “Disgrace” had greater value than “treasures?” The answer is found in the further comparison: It's the disgrace associated with “Christ” or the treasures of “Egypt.” For you and me this could be “Christ” or “my goals;” “Christ” or “my house;” “Christ” or “my education;” “Christ” or “my leisure.”

Authentic faith does not merely “put off” something; it “puts on” something. Moses “put off” the pleasures of sin because he had a much greater pleasure in Christ.

Picture with quote http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_John_Climacus

John Climacus, a monastic of the 6th Century A.D. wrote: “A chaste man is someone who has driven out bodily love by means of divine love, who has used heavenly fire to quench the fires of the flesh.”ⁱⁱⁱ The inspired Scriptures consistently tell us the same thing. We are not only to “put off,” fleeing from sin; but we are to “put on,” fleeing to Christ. You can't say “no” to sin until you have a bigger “yes” to Christ.

This “yes” to Christ leads us to another characteristic of people of faith...

...they are worshippers.

Where do I see that in these verses? Verse 21 is probably the most explicit: “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and *worshiped* as he leaned on the top of his staff” (Hebrews 11:21).

That’s the only time the word “worship” appears in this chapter. But there are other words that describe these individuals as people of worship. One of the most common is the word “offer” or “offered.” What was Abel doing that provoked such a violent reaction on the part of this brother? He was “*offering* to God a better sacrifice than Cain.” In other words, he was worshipping (Hebrews 11:4). And what was Abraham told to do in that final, great test of his life – “*offer*” up Isaac to God. That is an act of worship!

Hebrews has a lot to say about worship, both individually and corporately. And what is worship? In essence, it is *offering* ourselves up to God. After all, that’s what Jesus did. Look at Hebrews 9:14 –

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit *offered* himself unblemished to God... Hebrews 9:14

And turn one page over, to Hebrews 10:12 –

But when this priest [Jesus] had *offered* for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Hebrews 10:12^{iv}

This is the same worship of faith that Paul calls us to in Romans 12:1-2 –

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to *offer* your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:1-2

What does God want? Jesus says that the Father seeks worshippers who “worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). God wants us to be worshipers before he wants us to be workers. True, our work *for* God is an expression of our worship *of* God. But sometimes in our activist world, we get the cart before horse.

I think Enoch got it right. What is he known for? He simply “walked with God.” No great accomplishments from a human point of view. Just a heart for God. Enoch was a worshiper who offered himself to God and God commended him for it.

God wants your devotion before he wants your duty. He wants you to be so captivated by who He is that your primary passion in life is not first of all doing something for him, but giving him yourself.

As you continue to do this, you as these heroes of the faith will...

... finish well.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones. Hebrews 11:20-22

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph finished well. And I think that the very fact that these old-timers are mentioned was an encouragement to these Hebrew believers to stay the course.

But not all those mentioned in Hebrews 11 finished well. Noah was a hero of the faith at the ripe old age of 600 when he built the ark. But then he got drunk and we hear very little about the last 350 years of his life. In fact, of the approximately 100 individuals in the Bible for whom we have sufficient information, only about 1/3 finished well.^v

Today, some Christians don't finish well; some die long before they are buried. God needs marathoners, not sprinters. God is looking for those who have the spiritual guts and stamina to finish the race...and to finish well. Paul says, "I have finished the race" (2 Timothy 4:7). Among the ancient Greeks, it wasn't the runner that finished in the least amount of time, but the one that finished the race with his torch still lit! Will that be you? Or is your "torch" about to go out?

Let me ask you: How many of you have been a Christ follower for more than 30 years? Would you just raise your hand? For more than 40 years? For more than 50 years? For more than 60 years? For more than 70 years?

Not all finish well, but some do. I think of Caleb in the book of Joshua.

So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. *Now give me this hill country* that the LORD promised me that day. Joshua 14:10-12

That should be our perspective as we enter the twilight years of our lives: "Now give me this hill country!" What new land is God calling you to possess for His glory? What new ministry is God calling you to? What new steps of faith is He urging you to take before you transition from this life to the next?

Finally, all of these people of faith mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11 ...

...are commended by God.

This fact is actually mentioned five times in Hebrews 11^{vi} The chapter begins with this thought: “This is what the ancients were *commended* for” (Hebrews 11:2). And the chapter ends with this thought: “These were all *commended* for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised” (Hebrews 11:39).

Do you desire God’s commendation, God’s approval? It comes by faith.

What step of faith is God calling you to take?

ⁱ Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, 286.

ⁱⁱ It’s interesting that the sixth person mentioned in Cain’s line of descent is Lamech, the first bigamist in the Bible. But the sixth person mentioned in Seth’s line of descent is Enoch, who it is said, “walked with God.”

ⁱⁱⁱ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 209 as cited by Gary L. Thomas, *The Glorious Pursuit* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 101.

^{iv} Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a *sacrifice* of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such *sacrifices* God is pleased. Heb 13:15-16

^v *Ibid.*, 13.

^{vi} Cf. Heb 11:4, 5, 16.