

Hebrews 11:1-12:3: Faith in Action (Part 1)

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Abstract

This session explores Hebrews 11:1–12:3, analyzing how the author defines and illustrates faith as an active, forward-looking orientation toward God's unseen and future realities. Dr. David deSilva examines the rhetorical structure of this "encomium on faith," noting how it utilizes Greco-Roman example lists and devices like anaphora to persuade the audience to endure hostility and social dislocation. By reviewing exemplars from the pre-flood era, the patriarchs, and Moses, the lecture demonstrates that faith is the "title deed" to God's promised inheritance, prompting believers to embrace the identity of resident aliens on earth in anticipation of a permanent heavenly city. Ultimately, these examples serve as models for a community suffering reproach, reminding them that loyalty to God is the sole path to divine attestation and eternal honor.

Outline

I. Introduction to Hebrews 11:1–12:3: Faith in Action

A. Theological context: Hebrews 10:39 introduces faith as a key value to preserve one's life or soul.

B. Transition and boundaries of the section

1. Chapter breaks are artificial; the block of text on faith spans Hebrews 11:1 to Hebrews 12:3.
2. Climax is Hebrews 12:1–3, featuring Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter of faith" who crystallizes the exemplars.

C. Structural and rhetorical elements

1. Resembles ancient Greco-Roman example lists (e.g., Seneca's *On Benefits*, Books 3 and 5).
2. Use of anaphora: repeating the phrase "by faith" (Greek *piste*) to mark each step.
3. Concluding summary statements (Hebrews 11:32) mirroring Seneca's rhetorical trope ("time would fail me").
4. Concluding exhortation to imitation (Hebrews 12:1–3) based on a "great cloud of witnesses."

II. The Pastoral Purpose and General Observations of Faith

A. Purpose: To demonstrate the praiseworthiness of faith

1. Proves that the way of faith achieves God's character witness and an honorable remembrance.
2. Addresses the audience's loss of social honor and neighborhood acceptance.
3. Selected and shaped examples to match the audience's specific experience of reproach, shame, loss, and hostility (Hebrews 10:32–34).

B. Three general observations about the nature of faith

1. Faith looks forward to God's reward, promises, and admonitions.
2. Faith-filled people orient themselves in this world wholly based on God's future.
3. Faith-filled people make choices based on what is expedient for attaining God's promised benefactions, even if it leads to loss of status, homeland, honor, wealth, and life.
4. Faith views this world as a land of sojourning, looking ahead to the unshakeable city God has prepared.

III. Defining Faith (Hebrews 11:1–2)

A. Faith as "the substance (hypostasis) of things hoped for"

1. Philosophical definition: substance or underlying essence of something.
2. Legal/business definition: "title deed" or guarantee, directly addressing the believers' loss of physical property (Hebrews 10:34).
3. It represents an objective reality in hand, not a mere subjective feeling of assurance.

B. Faith as "the proof (elenchos) of things not seen"

1. Legal term signifying an irrefutable, necessary fact that establishes a case in court.
2. Constructing a reciprocal relationship: without trust, unseen realities do not materialize; with trust, their reality is demonstrated in the present.

C. Relationship to hope (Hebrews 6:19–20)

1. Faith is the title deed to the inheritance; hope is the anchor/tether to the eternal harbor.
2. Faith is the first installment or "down payment" (hypostasis, Hebrews 3:14) firm to the end.

D. Attestation and approval (marturia, Hebrews 11:2)

1. Roman inscription context: marturia is used by authorities to endorse a benefactor as politically reliable and worthy of honor.
2. Focuses the audience on receiving divine attestation in God's court rather than seeking approval from outside society.

IV. Examples of Faith Before the Flood (Hebrews 11:3–7)

A. The invisible creation (Hebrews 11:3)

1. Establishes the ultimate dependence of the visible world on the superior, invisible realm.
2. Uses visible creation as a logical proof for the existence of the invisible cause.

B. Abel (Hebrews 11:4)

1. Sacrifice made greater through the presence of faith/trust.
2. Enjoys life after death: "though being dead, he still speaks," showing faith's transcendence over death.
3. Reflects Second Temple speculations (Septuagint's dividing of offerings; Josephus's moral qualities).

C. Enoch (Hebrews 11:5–6)

1. Translation to bypass death demonstrates faith's power over mortality.
2. Septuagint translation shift: Hebrew "walked with God" becomes "pleased God."
3. Prerequisites to pleasing God: believing God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him out.
4. Reflects a patron-client relationship where God's favor is worth seeking and reliable.

D. Noah (Hebrews 11:7)

1. Built the ark in reverent obedience based on warning of unseen future events.
2. Acted in a way neighbors would consider foolish, anticipating the eschatological shaking of elements.

V. Abraham and the Patriarchs (Hebrews 11:8–22)

A. Abraham's departure and sojourn (Hebrews 11:8–10)

1. Willingness to put his native land behind and accept alien/foreigner status.
2. Deliberate choice to embrace lower social status and vulnerability in obedience to God's call.
3. Lived in tents with Isaac and Jacob, looking past Canaan to the heavenly homeland (the city with foundations, built by God).

B. Offspring in old age (Hebrews 11:11–12)

1. Sarah's barrenness and Abraham's advanced age overcome because they considered the Promiser reliable.
2. Stark Greek language: life emerges from a "dead man" (lifeless procreative parts), mirroring the transcendence of death.

C. Commentary on the Patriarchs' status (Hebrews 11:13–16)

1. Publicly confessed they were strangers and resident aliens on earth (Genesis 23:4, 24:37).
2. Refused opportunities to return to their original earthly homelands and status.

3. Highly relevant to the audience's social dislocation; urges them to persist in their journey rather than returning to pagan society.

4. God is not ashamed to be called their God because they valued the eternal heavenly city.

D. The binding of Isaac (Hebrews 11:17–19)

1. Act of trust in God's ability to raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill His irrevocable promise.

2. Historically viewed as the supreme sign of fidelity during the Second Temple period.

E. Generational blessings (Hebrews 11:20–22)

1. Isaac blessing Jacob and Esau regarding future things.

2. Jacob blessing Joseph's sons and worshipping at the head of his staff (Septuagint translation of pilgrim staff, reinforcing pilgrim identity).

3. Joseph instructing concerning his bones, showing that even in a high Egyptian office, he knew Egypt was not his home.

VI. Moses and the Exodus (Hebrews 11:23–28)

A. Hiding of infant Moses (Hebrews 11:23)

1. Act of faith by his parents who did not fear the king's edict.

B. Moses' renunciation of status (Hebrews 11:24–26)

1. Renounced his high position in Egyptian royalty (historically viewed as heir to the throne).

2. Chose mistreatment with the people of God over temporary pleasures of sin.

3. Evaluated the "reproach of Christ" as possessing greater worth than Egypt's treasures, looking to the reward.

C. Departure from Egypt (Hebrews 11:27)

1. Left Egypt without fearing the king's anger, persevering as "seeing the invisible" God.

2. Second Temple rewrites (Josephus, Artaphanus) eliminate cowardice from his flight.

D. Passover and the Red Sea (Hebrews 11:28–29)

1. Passover and blood sprinkling: acts of trust celebrating salvation in advance.

2. Crossing the Red Sea: walk of extreme trust, serving as a prototype of eschatological judgment.

VII. Conquest and Rahab (Hebrews 11:30–31)

A. Fall of Jericho (Hebrews 11:30)

1. Fortifications fell after seven days of marching, showing obedience over common sense.

B. Rahab the prostitute (Hebrews 11:31)

1. Chose partnership with the people of God over the fortifications of an unstable, temporary earthly city.
2. Confessed faith in God's promise and welcomed spies in peace.