

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS 11

The dictionary defines "faith" as confidence, trust or belief. Sounds pretty straightforward! But when it comes to understanding about faith in God, we can come up with a lot of questions - Is there only one true faith? Is it mainly an emotion? Is it trying to believe something that is hard to believe? Does it mean having your act together? And does it guarantee us smooth sailing? Or is there a cost involved - and if so, is it worth it?

We're not the first group of people who have had questions like these - folks have been asking them from the very beginning. In fact, in this Bible study series, we're going to be looking at part of a letter addressed to some first century church congregations that were struggling with these very issues.

In many ways, the people in the early church were much like the people in typical congregations of today. First of all, they were a mixed bag, made up of men and women of all ages and life situations. They were also mixed in the sense that some had decided to count on Jesus Christ to give them real, eternal life, and others knew about Christ, but had not moved on to a true faith relationship with Him.

There is something else that these first century church people shared in common with their counterparts of today. It was becoming clear to the authentic believers and uncommitted by-standers alike that real Christianity is counter-cultural. In fact, at the time when the letter to the Hebrews was written, the surrounding society was not only in disagreement with the Christian world view and lifestyle, it was also becoming increasingly hostile and threatening. Families, communities and governments wanted to know where people really stood on this issue of trusting and following Christ. Social standing, employment, even survival were put on the line in many cases. More and more it became apparent that personal decisions about faith in Jesus Christ had all kinds of consequences, and that there apparently was no middle ground. A lot of the folks who had just been going along for the ride were considering going back to their former religion, Judaism, because it appeared to be a safer option. Others of the unbelievers were true seekers, considering the claims of Christ very seriously indeed in the face of honest difficulties and questions.

Finally, the congregations of that era were very much like those of today in that the real believers were having real struggles. This was happening in spite of the fact that they belonged to Jesus Christ in this life and the next. They were constantly being tempted to look for solutions based on what the rest of the world was doing and thinking. They were at times tired, afraid, angry, confused, sometimes pressed so hard by life that they wondered if it was all worth it. They experienced times of failure, and then wondered how they stood with the Christ who had loved them enough to die for them.

In gracious response to all these circumstances being faced by people He loved, God sent exactly what was needed. By means of an unknown author, He sent this letter to the Hebrews, full of challenging truth and healing encouragement. (And we may as well consider it to be "our mail" too, because that's God's intent.) To those who are about to decide against putting their trust in His Son Jesus, He gives clear and loving warning. To those who trust in Christ, but who are stumbling on the journey, He sends fog-clearing perspective, hope and affirmation. And some of the most precious gifts from this letter are found in several beautiful portraits of the Savior that let us see Him as He truly is.

Crowning this great love letter is the 11th chapter, from which we will be drawing our subjects in this series of studies. In this chapter, God as the wise and understanding Teacher shows us His "resume" - He shows us events and life stories of real people to demonstrate what He is like and how He deals with those who dare to trust Him. As we study this passage, He gives us the opportunity to see for ourselves if faith in Him is worth it, if it's safe, what it really looks like lived out by someone very much like ourselves. This chapter also serves as His "letters of recommendation" - we'll see for ourselves if these folks found Him trustworthy every step of the way, whether they were "getting it right" or not.

Several women will be taking a part in writing these studies, and we are very grateful for their willingness to serve us all in this way. In general, the New American Standard (NAS) and the New International (NIV) versions of Scripture will be used. And just one last thing before we dig into our first study. We will be looking at several real "personal journeys of faith" in this series. You might consider keeping a journal of your own faith journey. In a simple notebook just take time now and then to write down what you discover as you study the Word and live with God daily. This can be a great tool for growth, understanding and ultimate praise and gratitude to God. And now let's open our Bibles to the 11th chapter of Hebrews and count on God to be our teacher.

Read through Hebrews 11:1-12:3 for an overview of coming attractions.

1. Read the following passages (these are some of the portraits of Jesus Christ). Note anything that is particularly helpful or beautiful to you.

Hebrews 2:9-11, 14-18

Hebrews 4:14-16

Hebrews 7:23-27

Hebrews 10:19-23

2. Read the attached sheet on why and how we do Bible study. Make notes of any comments or questions you'd like to share with the group.

3. Think through your goals/desires/dreams for Bible study this year. What motivated you to join this study? What do you hope to gain?

4. Think through the practical aspects of belonging to a study group. Are you committed to regularly attending the study? Will you attempt to keep your calendar free of other commitments that would prevent you from attending? When will you work on your study? Think through the actual time of day and days of the week you want to set aside to study.

5. Now, commit all these goals and desires to the Lord. Pray that God will bring fruit in your life through the study of His Word. You may want to write out your prayer here.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man/woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. II Timothy 3:16-17

Kathy Rosenvall & Diane Herdegen/lp