

PART FOUR 11:1 - 12:13

Faith and Endurance

¹Now faith concerns the underlying reality of what we hope for; it demonstrates conviction about things not yet seen.

[NRSV ‘faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’]

²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

³By faith we understand that the epochs were arranged by the utterance of God

[NRSV ‘worlds were prepared by the word of God’],

so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

As was stated in introducing this section, to maintain its public confession of Christ, the community will need ‘endurance’ (10:36) in ‘faith’(10:39). Our author begins by speaking of faith (11:1-40). He will go on to speak of endurance (12:1-13). In verse one he is not interested in an abstract definition of faith. Rather, he highlights an aspect of faith on which he will concentrate in this exhortation. As he will show from an analysis of Jewish history, faith includes a present commitment of trust that God will bring about in the future what God has promised. For a lengthy treatment of biblical faith, see the commentary on James 1:3. The alternate translation of verse one aims to stress the ‘underlying reality’(Greek: *hupostasis*) of what God has promised.

To encourage the community to be faithful, our author turns to the history of ‘our ancestors’(Greek: *presbuteroi*)—the common Jewish designation for the authoritative bearers of tradition (see Joshua 24:31; Judges 2:7). Their faith is recorded in the sacred scriptures – a demonstration that it has God’s approval. These ancestors were faithful in a remarkable way. They kept on trusting in God’s fidelity, sustained by their hope in God’s promises. Our author’s point is that if they were faithful in this way, what does this say to us who, because of Jesus, have ‘a better hope, through which we approach God’(7:19)? Echoing throughout this whole section is his earlier exhortation: ‘Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful’(10:23). There is no excuse for us if we fail to become ‘imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises’(6:12). For Jesus ‘is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises’(8:6). We are privileged to have ‘the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance’(9:15).

At the moment the community is suffering. Like their ancestors, and for greater reason, they must be faithful. Surely we should have faith in God’s ability to bring into existence what we do not yet see. This is what happened when by his powerful word he brought creation into being. As the author of the Book of Wisdom says: ‘if people were amazed at the power and working of creation, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them’(Wisdom 13:4). Likewise Paul: ‘Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made’(Romans 1:20).

The first example of ‘the righteous ones who lived by faith’(10:38) is Abel. The account in Genesis places the accent on the fact that, unlike Cain, he offered to God ‘from the very best part’ of his flocks (Genesis 4:4). It also speaks of his ‘blood’ still speaking, crying out to God for vengeance (see Genesis 4:10). Our author gives no reason for his sacrifice being more acceptable, and stresses that it is Abel’s ‘faith’ through which he still speaks, *to us*.

His second example is Enoch, who ‘sought God’ so intensely, and whose faith that God would reward him was so complete, that ‘God took him’ and ‘he did not experience death’. It was this same ‘reward’ of intimate divine communion of which our author spoke earlier when he exhorted the community: ‘Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward’(10:35).

The third example is Noah, the first of the ancestors to be explicitly described in the scriptures as ‘righteous’ (Genesis 6:9; 7:1). God told him of the coming flood, but promised: ‘I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark’(Genesis 6:18). Noah’s faith is shown in his obedience: ‘Noah did all that God commanded him’(Genesis 6:22). Because of his ‘obedience of faith’(Romans 1:5; 16:26), he ‘became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith’.

When he speaks of Noah ‘saving his household’, the thoughts of his audience necessarily go to Christ who ‘was faithful over God’s house as a Son’(3:6), our ‘great priest over the house of God’(10:21). In the Genesis account, the ark is a temple rising above the waters of chaos, holding within itself all life. It is a source of hope and a beacon against the darkness. It stands as a symbol of the Church of Christ, the ‘household’ of God.

As Noah’s household, gathered together in the ark, were saved from destruction, so we, gathered in the Christian assembly, obedient to God’s word, and doing what faith requires of us, will ‘inherit salvation’(1:14). Christ ‘became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’(5:9).

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.

⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and ‘he was not found, because God had taken him’ (Genesis 3:24). For it was attested before he was taken away that ‘he had pleased God’(Genesis 3:24, LXX).

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

⁷By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised.

¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore' (Genesis 22:17).

Obedience is an essential element of faith – something our author has already stressed in relation to Jesus (see 5:7-9). It is Abraham's faithful obedience that our author underlines, as he did in speaking of Noah. Notice the points that he highlights. He speaks of 'a place that Abraham was to receive as an inheritance'. The place is not named, and Abraham obeys God's call. He 'set out, not knowing where he was going', thus demonstrating his complete trust in God that God would give him 'things not yet seen' (11:1).

He 'stayed for a time in the land he had been promised'; but this is not 'the place that he was to receive as an inheritance', for he stayed there 'as in a foreign land, living in tents'. Our author is echoing Abraham's own words: 'I am a stranger and an alien residing among you' (Genesis 23:4). It was the same for his son and grandson. The promise which they continued to 'look forward to' because of their faith in God was not Canaan. This was only the place where they wandered while they waited for that which God promised: 'the city that has foundations'. The description is traditional for Jerusalem, 'the city founded by the Lord' (Psalm 87:1). Our author is thinking of what he will speak of shortly as the 'homeland' that we are seeking (11:14), 'the city God has prepared' for us (11:16), 'the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22), wherein is the sanctuary entered by Christ our high priest and into which all who are united in faith with Christ are invited.

He spoke earlier of God's promise to Abraham: 'I will surely bless you and multiply you' (6:14). There he stressed Abraham's patient endurance. Here the accent is on his faith. God whose powerful word created the world 'from things that are not visible' (11:3), made it possible for one who was 'as good as dead' to engender life in a barren womb. Paul stresses the same thing when he writes:

Abraham did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

– Romans 4:19

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and all their descendants in faith down to the time of Christ continued to live faithfully in the light of God's promise, even though they 'died without receiving the promises'. Picking up Abraham's self-description once again, our author characterises this long caravan of people as 'strangers and foreigners on the earth'. Though living in what he has just called 'the Promised Land' (11:9), they knew that they were 'seeking a homeland', 'a heavenly one'. They continued to cry out with the psalmist:

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your
passing guest, an alien, like all my forebears.

– Psalm 39:12

Their faith has not been in vain, says our author, for indeed 'God has prepared a city for them'.

He is offering a clear challenge to the Christian community for whom he is composing this oration. Abraham and all his descendants in faith remained faithful even though they saw what was promised to them 'from a distance'. Yet they welcomed God's promises and awaited their fulfilment with keen expectation. How much more should we be faithful 'in these last days' (1:1), knowing that our 'champion' has already defeated sin and entered the sanctuary of heaven once and for all, and that 'in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay' (10:37)?

¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.

¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ¹⁸of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.'

(Genesis 21:12)

¹⁹He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead — and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

²⁰By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau.

²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff'(Genesis 47:31).

²²By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

Continuing the story of Abraham, our author comes to the greatest test of all. Having been asked to let go of his past, Abraham is now asked to let go of his future. He had put his faith in God, and God has miraculously made the fulfilment of the promise possible through the conception and birth of Isaac. Yet now God seemed to be taking away the only means (Isaac is Abraham's 'only son'), the God-given means, by which the promise was to come about. The story is found in Genesis 22. Abraham was to have faith only in God, not in Isaac, not in the means that God had given. Put to the test, Abraham remained faithful. If God can bring Isaac into existence from his and his wife's 'dead' bodies, 'God is able even to raise someone from the dead'. The translation 'figuratively speaking' seems to interpret verse nineteen as saying that in a way of speaking Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead. Our author may, on the other hand, be presenting this scene as foreshadowing the time when 'God brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus' (13:20). The radical nature of this sacrifice ensured it a central place in Jewish reflection. In the New Testament, James uses it as an example to demonstrate that real faith must show itself in obedient action:

Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

– James 2:20-21

To invoke a blessing upon someone demonstrates faith, for it is to hand on the promise. Isaac's blessing of his sons is recorded in Genesis 27:27-40. In Genesis 48:14-20, Jacob goes against expectations based on tradition when he gives his main blessing to Ephraim over his older brother, Manasseh. The peculiar image evoked by the text which is quoted from Genesis 47:31, comes from a misreading of the Hebrew in the Septuagint which our author is following. The Hebrew has Jacob fall back on his pillow ('the head of the bed'). The Septuagint mistook 'bed' (*mittah*) for 'staff' (*matteh*).

Joseph spoke of the exodus (see Genesis 50:24). He then 'made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here"' (Genesis 50:25). In this way he demonstrated his faith in God's promise (see Exodus 13:9; Joshua 24:32; Sirach 49:15).

Because of their faith, Moses' parents were instrumental in forwarding God's saving design. They chose fear of the Lord rather than fear of the pharaoh. As the adopted child of the daughter of the pharaoh, Moses was heir to a life of privilege (perhaps understood as including succession). He rejected this, choosing to belong to the people of the Messianic promise. He put his faith in the promised reward, even though it meant submitting to oppression. He is a perfect example for the Christian community who are being urged to choose the path of faith even though it involves suffering oppression.

We might pause here to reflect with Job on the folly of choosing 'the fleeting pleasures of sin':

Such are the paths of all who forget God;
 the hope of the godless shall perish.
 Their confidence is gossamer,
 a spider's house their trust.
 If one leans against its house, it will not stand;
 if one lays hold of it, it will not endure.
 The wicked thrive before the sun,
 and their shoots spread over the garden.
 Their roots twine around the stone heap;
 they live among the rocks.
 If they are destroyed from their place, then it will deny
 them, saying, 'I have never seen you.'

– Job 8:13-18

They will not be rich,
 and their wealth will not endure,
 nor will they strike root in the earth;
 they will not escape from darkness;
 the flame will dry up their shoots,
 and their blossom will be swept away by the wind.
 Let them not trust in emptiness, deceiving themselves;
 for emptiness will be their recompense.
 It will be paid in full before their time,
 and their branch will not be green.
 They will shake off their unripe grape, like the vine,
 and cast off their blossoms, like the olive tree.

– Job 15:29-34 (see 18:5-21; 20:4-29)

Moses suffered in the cause of belonging to the people who were awaiting the Christ. It was because he kept his sights on 'him who is invisible (see 11:1), that he overcame his fear (see Exodus 2:14) and, like Abraham, left Egypt for the unknown.

²³By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

²⁶He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward.

²⁷By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.

²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

Moses was following the ‘obedience of faith’ when he kept the Passover (see Exodus 12). The focus is on the ‘firstborn’ because the inheritance passes through them; in this case, the inheritance is that of the promise.

The people share Moses’ faith in passing through the Red Sea (see Exodus 14:22). We read in the Book of Wisdom:

Wisdom brought them over the Red Sea, and led them through deep waters; but she drowned their enemies, and cast them up from the depth of the sea.

– Wisdom 10:18-19

The obedience of faith is demonstrated also in the story of the capture of Jericho (see Joshua 6:14-20), and in role played in it by Rahab (see Joshua 2:1; 6:17).

After what he has said, it is enough to remind his listeners that throughout the whole of their history there have been faithful people who put their trust in God as they awaited the fulfilment of God's promise. The faith of Gideon is recorded in the Book of Judges 6-8; of Barak in Judges 4-5; of Samson in Judges 13-16; and Jephthah in Judges 10-11. The faith of David and Samuel is recorded in the Books of Samuel. These and others after them 'through faith' 'conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises'.

Our author recalls seven ways in which, because of their faith, people were miraculously delivered from certain death. The first recalls Daniel, kept safe in the lion's den (see Daniel 6:19,23). The second recalls the miraculous deliverance of his three companions from the fiery furnace (see Daniel 3:19-28, 49-50). The next four are expressed in general terms, and the final example recalls the widow of Zarephath (1Kings 17:17-24) and the Shunammite woman (2Kings 4:18-37) who both had their dead sons miraculously restored to them.

³²And what more should I say?

For time would fail me to tell of

Gideon,

Barak,

Samson,

Jephthah,

of David

and Samuel

and the prophets —

³³who through faith conquered kingdoms,

administered justice,

obtained promises,

shut the mouths of

lions,

³⁴quenched raging fire,

escaped the edge of the sword,

won strength out of weakness,

became mighty in war,

put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection.

^{35b}**Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.**

³⁶**Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.**

³⁷**They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword;**

they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹**Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.**

Not all who put their faith in God experienced miraculous delivery. Thinking especially of the heroic martyrs of the ruthless persecution of the Maccabean period, our author recalls those who persevered in faith through torture, suffering verbal abuse, flogging and even imprisonment. It was their faith in the promise which sustained them. The Second Book of Maccabees records the heroic stand taken by a mother who preferred to see her seven sons die than have them commit apostasy. As one of the seven sons said as he neared death: ‘One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!’ (2Maccabees 7:14). They remained faithful, says our author, ‘in order to obtain a better resurrection’.

Eleazar was placed on the rack and beaten to death (see 2Maccabees 6:18-31); Zechariah was stoned (2Chronicles 24:21, an event recalled also by Jesus (see Matthew 23:35)). According to legend, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two.

After a graphic description of the sufferings endured during periods of persecution, our author repeats what he said earlier concerning the patriarchs (see 11:13): ‘though they were commended for their faith, *they did not receive what was promised*’.

It was all so that *we* would receive the promise. The long journey of faith from Abel on reached its fulfilment in Christ and in the Christian community. If they were so heroic in maintaining their faith in a future promise which they never saw, how can we, the recipients of the promise, fail to believe? How can we, whatever sufferings may be entailed, give in to fear and ‘drift away from’ (2:1) or ‘neglect so great a salvation’ (2:3)?

The author concludes this central section of his oration by urging his listeners to join him in emulating the example of their ancestors. The subject is still faith, but the focus is on the need to endure in obedient submission to divine discipline. As he said in introducing this section: ‘you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised’(10:36).

He draws his imagery from the athletic stadium. The heroes of the past to whom he has been referring are there cheering them on as it is now their turn to ‘run the race that is set before us’. As they strip for the race, they must strip away everything that weighs them down, especially ‘the deceitfulness of sin’(3:13) that can only distract them.

In chapter eleven he pointed to heroic examples from their past. Wonderful as is their example, an even more wonderful example is nearer to hand – Jesus himself, described here as the ‘champion’(Greek: archēgos, 2,10) and ‘perfecter’(Greek: teleiōtēs) of their faith. Jesus was the first to engage in the struggle with the forces of evil and with death and to be victorious. He has also been referred to as our ‘forerunner’ who completed the race and has gained the prize, having entered the sanctuary of heaven (see 6:20). As our author never tires of repeating, it is Jesus who has been ‘made perfect forever’(7:28), and ‘having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’(5:9). However, as he also said earlier: ‘God made the champion (archēgos) of their salvation perfect through sufferings’(2:10). it is on this aspect the focuses here.

Jesus kept his eye on the finishing line and the glory promised by God. He was never distracted by sin, and he endured in his faith throughout the terrible and humiliating ordeal of the crucifixion. God was faithful to Jesus who now ‘has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God’(see 1:3; 2:9; 8:1; 10:12). They are being asked to endure in faith in a hostile environment. Let them keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. He, too, suffered hostility, but he is now in glory, and has opened the way to glory for us as well.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely [or ‘distracts so easily’], and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,

²looking to Jesus the champion [NRSV ‘pioneer’] and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

⁵And you have [or 'have you?'] forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children — 'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; ⁶for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.'

(Proverbs 3:11-12)

⁷Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children.

⁹Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰For they [our human fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he [God] disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

We are still being depicted as in the stadium, but now as engaged in hand to hand combat. Difficult as is the struggle, our opponent has not yet drawn blood. If, as some suggest, this oration is intended for the Roman church, it must surely have preceded the bloody persecution of Nero.

Our author is reminding us, through a reflection on Proverbs 3:11-12, that God is a loving Father who must discipline us 'for our good'. We accept discipline from our human parents. God is 'the Father of spirits', the transcendent One to whom the heavenly world is subject. God is disciplining us so that we will be purified of everything that impedes divine communion, for he wants to share with us 'his holiness'. We must not forget that Jesus himself 'although he was a Son, learned obedience through what he suffered'(5:8). We are reminded of the words of the risen Christ: 'I reprove and discipline those whom I love'(Revelation 3:19).

Verse eleven makes the traditional link between righteousness and ultimate peace:

The effect of righteousness will be peace.

– Isaiah 32:17

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss.

– Psalm 85:10

Verse twelve draws on the following:

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you.'

– Isaiah 35:3-4.

Verse thirteen introduces the theme of the following section. Compare:

Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure.

– Proverbs 4:26