LIVING BY FAITH

Hebrews 11:1–40

Key Verse: 11:13

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.”

How do you approach life? Many people live in survival mode, just getting by doing the bare minimum. Some depend on others, others depend on themselves. Many try to hide from life’s hardships and cocoon themselves with wealth and comfort. In today’s passage we see a list of people who, the author says, lived by faith. What does that mean? How can we live by faith? Why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his words.

Read 10:36. The author has been encouraging Christians who were having a hard time continuing on. He urges them to persevere. And to help them, he quotes from Scripture. Look at 10:37,38. These are a reference to the prophecy of Habakkuk 2:3,4. Habakkuk was a prophet living in Judah just before the Babylonian invasion. He couldn’t understand how wickedness, strife and oppression could be rampant among his people while God seemed to be doing nothing. In 2:3,4 God encourages Habakkuk to wait on God’s right time. And these verses contain one of the most famous messages of God to his people in the Old Testament: “The righteous will live by faith.” Actually, Abraham in Genesis learned this spiritual lesson (Ge15:6). Apostle Paul based his famous letter to the Romans on this principle (Ro1:17) and he repeated it elsewhere as well (Gal3:11; Eph2:8). Here, the author of Hebrews proclaims this message to encourage God’s suffering people in his time. Read 10:38,39. Here, to “shrink back” means to wimp out, to give up. It tells us that faith in God enables us to persevere. Moreover, faith in God gives us courage.

To emphasize living by faith the author gives a long list of examples. But first he starts off with a definition. Read 11:1. Two key words here are “confidence” and “assurance.” In Greek the word for “confidence” literally means “having a firm foundation.” It implies being a person of substance who is firm and courageous. The word for “assurance” implies “proven” or “tested,” and thus, “convinced.” It’s easy to feel unsure, unstable or shaky, especially when we face uncertainties and trials. It’s hard to be confident and assured when reality seems to tell us to be scared or to give up. How can we have this faith?

Read verse 2. The ancients are people of faith in the Old Testament. It says they were “commended for” their faith. Here, the root word in Greek is the same as “martyr.” It means these people gave a good testimony of their faith; they proved that it was genuine by how they lived and died. It also means that God recognized them. As we think about these people’s faith, we’re inspired.

What was the essence of their faith? Read verse 3. The ancients’ faith was creation faith. What is creation faith? It means to believe that God created the universe by his word of command. We see this in Genesis 1. God spoke, and by the sheer power of his word, all things came into being. To have faith, to live by faith, means to believe that God is the Almighty Creator who made this world out of nothing by the power of his word. When we have faith in this Almighty Creator God, we’re afraid of nothing and no one. When we have faith in this Almighty Creator God, we can overcome even the most impossible situations.

Who’s the first person of faith the author mentions on his list? Read verse 4. It would be easy to overlook Abel. Why is he such an important model of faith? It’s not because he won a spiritual competition with his brother; it’s because he kept his focus on God, even when things seemed so discouraging. His parents Adam and Eve sinned against God and the family was banished from the Garden of Eden. The world came under God’s curse due to their sin. But Abel was not discouraged. He brought God an offering. It was fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. It wasn’t about just the act or the substance itself; it was the heart behind it. Abel wanted to show God his sincere gratitude. Despite the negativity around him, he still believed that God is good and that God deserves to be praised and worshipped wholeheartedly. Though people might not have recognized his offering, God did. God saw his faith and was pleased. It’s not mentioned here, but his brother Cain got so upset that he killed him. But by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. What is he saying? He’s saying that no matter how discouraging the situation, we can always come to God and give him our best, and it always matters.

Who’s the next person? Read verse 5. Enoch is another rather obscure person of faith. What was exemplary about him? Genesis tells us that he walked with God. Though people of his time were enjoying eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage, Enoch enjoyed God’s presence. Enoch enjoyed just being with God, “hanging with” God. He was really an oddball. But God delighted in Enoch and was so pleased with his heart that he just took him straight to heaven without allowing him to experience death. Enoch’s example shows us how living by faith means enjoying fellowship with God.

In verses 1–5 we see the word “commended” repeated three times. God commends people who live by faith. God praises them. God is pleased by them.

Why? Read verse 6. God is pleased not just by outward acts, or words, or appearances, or even good personalities. God is pleased only by faith. In this verse we find the expression “anyone who comes to him.” Many people seem to come to God. Cain was one of them; he made an offering. But God wasn’t pleased. Why? Because Cain had no faith. When we come to God, he wants us to have real faith. What is real faith? This verse says real faith is composed of two things. First, it means to believe that God exists. Even though we may be doing many religious things, fulfilling many duties, we need to stop and consider who God is. God is not a concept. God is living. He exists. He’s real. Second, real faith means to believe that God rewards those who earnestly seek him. It means to believe that God is watching, that God sees our hearts. 2 Chronicles 16:9a says, “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” Living by faith means earnestly seeking God, having a heart fully committed to God.

The next exemplary person is Noah. Read verse 7. What did living by faith mean in Noah’s case? It meant believing God’s warning about invisible things. It meant taking action. It meant being obedient to God. It meant living in holy fear of God. Many people don’t take God’s word seriously, but Noah did. Noah didn’t verbally condemn others, but his act of faith unintentionally did. He built the ark while the people around him were ignoring God and partying. Noah’s act of faith, building the ark, looked foolish for a long time. But in the end he was right while the godless people around him were all badly wrong. In the end Noah inherited the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. “Righteousness” isn’t self-righteousness; it’s a right standing in God’s sight, a right relationship with God.

The next person on the list is Abraham. He’s mentioned in verses 8–12 and again in verses 17–19, eight verses. Abraham gets the most coverage on the list. Why is Abraham such a great example of living by faith? There are several reasons. Read verse 8. The main point here is that Abraham obeyed God’s calling. The author emphasizes “…even though he did not know where he was going.” It means that living by faith means both obeying God and really trusting God to lead my life. We like to know many things. We like to be in control. But living by faith means trusting God even though we may not know and we’re not in control. What else can we learn from Abraham’s faith? Read verse 9. Here the word “promise” is repeated twice. In fact, this word “promise” is repeated seven times in this chapter. Why? It tells us that living by faith means believing God’s promises. God’s promises are most of the time contrary to reality. Abraham was a stranger living in tents. He had no land of his own, actually. But he believed God’s promise absolutely. He passed on this same faith to his descendants Isaac and Jacob. He passed it on not through verbal teaching but through his life—he lived in tents in the promised land like a stranger. Why did he live that way? Read verse 10. It tells us another important aspect of living by faith. The “city with foundations” is not any place on this earth; it’s the heavenly kingdom. Read verse 16. Living by faith means longing for this heavenly city prepared for us by God. Frankly, longing for the world is contradictory to living by faith.

The author also mentions Abraham’s wife Sarah, who was an old, barren woman. Read verse 11. Actually Genesis tells us that Sarah’s faith was pretty weak. She really messed up when she gave Abraham her maidservant Hagar. When the angels announced she would have a child, she overheard and laughed in disbelief. But it says here that she “was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.” Sarah kept thinking about God’s promise and came to believe it personally. It was humanly, physically impossible, but she came to believe it because it was God’s promise. Living by faith means believing God’s promise even when it seems totally impossible. And though it usually looks foolish, living by faith has a great impact. Read verse 12.

The author wanted to say one more thing about Abraham’s example of living by faith. Read verses 17,18. What’s the main point here? It tells us that living by faith means trusting God’s promise even more than our human reason. It seemed not only cruel and unusual but also irrational to offer his one and only son Isaac as a sacrifice. But Abraham embraced God’s promises so firmly that he was ready to do it if God wanted. He especially held onto God’s promise that it would be through Isaac that his offspring would be reckoned. Read verse 19. It tells us that living by faith even affects our way of thinking. Living by faith means thinking not based on physical realities, but thinking based on God’s promises. In verses 20–22 the author emphasizes how Abraham’s descendants Isaac, Jacob and Joseph actually finished their lives of faith. They passed on the faith they inherited to future generations.

The next major person on this list of people of faith is Moses. His story is covered from verses 23–28, and it actually starts with his parents. According to verse 23 Moses’ parents lived by faith by disobeying the king’s edict and hiding baby Moses for three months. Their faith enabled them to overcome fear and see God’s special hand upon their child. And through their influence Moses himself learned personal faith. Read verses 24,25. Ths tells us yet another important aspect of living by faith. Living by faith gives us a clear identity as a child of God. Also it sometimes means giving up worldly privileges and pleasures. Living by faith means choosing to be among God’s people and even to be mistreated. How could Moses do that? Read verse 26. Living by faith helps us see far into the future and gives us a different value system. People really value worldly treasures—big money, great possessions. But even disgrace for the sake of Christ is worth more than all the treasures of this world. Why? Because there will be a future reward. As we’ve seen, it’s an eternal reward, the better city with foundations, the hope of being in heaven eternally with God. Both Abraham and Moses held onto this heavenly hope, despite their situation. So should we.

There are more lessons from Moses’ faith. Read verse 27. Here, living by faith meant going into a much harder situation, and persevering by looking at God who is invisible. 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, “For we live by faith, not by sight.” Living by faith means believing in the invisible God and his promises, even in hardship. Moses’ faith as a leader actually saved his people. Read verse 28.

Though they were so weak and discouraged, the Israelites were powerfully influenced by Moses’ faith. Read verse 29. Here, living by faith means walking through an impossible situation by trusting in God absolutely. Those who live by faith experience God’s mighty hand to save; those who do not, experience disaster. Read verse 30. Again God’s people experienced his mighty power when they lived by faith and followed his instructions to conquer an impossible place like Jericho. In the story of Jericho the author includes one more very unlikely example of faith. Who was it? Read verse 31. Even a prostitute Rahab learned to live by faith. In her case, living by faith meant siding with God’s people and welcoming them, putting her trust in the God of Israel.

Read verses 32–34. Living by faith gave these people unusual power; it made them conquerors, overcomers, and it transformed them at the crucial moment. Read verse 35. Here, living by faith means living with faith in the resurrection. Living by faith doesn’t necessarily mean wealth and prosperity in this life. Read verses 36–38. Living by faith means bearing all kinds of suffering and rejection with courage. The author’s comment is so inspiring: “…the world was not worthy of them.” Those who suffer much to live by faith are so precious, so valuable to God.

Read verses 39,40. Again the author mentions that they did not receive what had been promised in their lifetimes. But it didn’t mean God had forgotten them or had failed them. God would still keep all his promises to them by sending Jesus. 2 Corinthians 1:20a tells us, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.” We become heirs of all God’s better plans and promises through personal faith in Jesus.

Read verse 13 again. In this world there are so many discouraging things, so many bad examples, so many hardships. Living by faith makes us like foreigners and strangers on earth. But may God newly inspire us through this study to keep living by faith to the end, holding onto his promises. And may God bless us to influence future generations as we learn to live by faith.