

## Lesson Twenty

(11:4-22)

### THE PATRIARCHS AND FAITH

<sup>4</sup>By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. <sup>5</sup>By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. <sup>6</sup>And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. <sup>7</sup>By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith.

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. <sup>9</sup>By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. <sup>11</sup>By

faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

<sup>13</sup>These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup>For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup>If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup>But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." <sup>19</sup>He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. <sup>20</sup>By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. <sup>21</sup>By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. <sup>22</sup>By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial.

He who would come to God must 1) believe that God is, and 2) believe also that God rewards those who seek him, for without such faith, it is not possible to please God. Such are the sentiments expressed in the familiar text in v. 6, and which have been and will be eternally true. As was expressed in the comments on 10:39, the principle of justification by faith has always been true, including all who obey in believing, but excluding any and all who trust in another system of justifying, even if combined with Christianity (cf. Acts 15:1ff.). The particular response required by faith in God may vary, as from the time before the Mosaic law, to those who lived under the law of Moses, to us who live in the Christian age, but the demand of God for everyone to believe is the same always. Moreover, the principle has been the same for all, being the common meeting ground for Jew and Gentile, as Romans 3:27-31 shows. Jesus clearly taught that people who believed were honored by God, though not Jewish, Luke 4:16ff. All those who are mentioned in our lesson text were justified by faith, though not Jewish. Peter's statement in Acts 15:7-11 reflects his considered understanding of this exact point.

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON HEBREWS

As we study our text, the writer has chosen representative people in the ages prior to 1445 B.C., when God gave the law to Moses in written form. Each of those presented was characterized by a life of faith in God, though specific events are given that were highlights in each life. Note that 3:7 — 4:13 is relevant here, in that it is not just a matter of believing for awhile in God, but rather continual trust that is pleasing and thus rewarded. As Hebrews 11:13 shows, faith must continue until death. As Jesus said, "Let him who has ears to hear, be hearing."

11:4 — **by faith** — Repeated some 24 times in this chapter, "faith" as an act of obedience and issuing in obedience is held up for the consideration and imitation of those who were first to read this epistle. With their several problems, some of which we have noticed before, and the apparent inclination of some to seriously consider accepting Judaism over Christianity, the repeated teaching about faithfulness in spite of temptations to quit or switch is to the point.

**more acceptable** — The reason why is stated: by faith, in the way/manner God directed. What Cain offered was not what God had stipulated while Abel's was. By faith implies not only "doing" but "doing as." God had directed that incense be burnt to him, but the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, did not offer "as" God had directed. It is somewhat disputable just how finely God draws this line of which we are speaking, but that he draws a line between that which is acceptable and not acceptable is very clear. Cain and Abel are cases in point. We do well to adhere to what God has said as closely as possible rather than as little as possible.

**God being witness** — The Bible record discloses that God let Cain know in some manner that his offering was not acceptable, while his brother's, at least by implication, was acceptable. In the case of Christians, the offering of Jesus was/is acceptable to God, which is somewhat akin to that of Abel. We are, in addition, to offer our whole self to God, Romans 12:1-2, as our own sacrifice to God. This is clear enough. What is not so clear is the precise form that offering is to take in many instances. Stated differently, how to live the Christian life at all times is what we have in mind. Anyone who has tried to do so for awhile knows quite well that there are times and occasions when it is difficult, if not impossible, to know exactly what should be done. In these times, as at other times, we live by faith.

V. 5 — **Enoch . . . death** — The faith of this man was honored in such a way that physical death was not his lot in life. Naturally, we also understand that his faith also kept him from experiencing what we call spiritual death.

V. 6 — **without faith** — As discussed in the lesson introduction, the express form that faith may take can differ from time to time. God may require a particular life-style at one point in history, and another some

other time. The common denominator for all time and everyone is faith. No other "frame of mind" is acceptable to him. We have noted earlier that Christianity is a religion of evidence for faith, and persuasion based upon evidence. Those who are persuaded are described as obedient by faith, those not persuaded as disobedient unbelievers.

**believe . . . seek** — These two words encompass the whole of life: One must maintain a believing state of mind in reference to God, and be characterized by seeking God rather than the alternative: self-seeking.

**he rewards** — The preceding persons mentioned, Abel and Enoch were rewarded, one during his earthly life (as well as after it), the other after his earthly life, according to the record. Some of those who will be mentioned were rewarded here, some not, at least in the ordinary sense of reward. All were rewarded hereafter. The earthly rewards took several different forms, as is mentioned. A deeper look will help all to see that by faith, even that which is termed "loss" or "misfortune" was a means to blessing from God, even as Romans 8:28 promises. The first readers needed to see that though they had been mistreated in several different ways, their faith had done and would do the same for them as for these people being listed. It is also true for us today.

V. 7 — **Noah** — Sometimes the obedience God required took explicit forms, as in the building of an ark. Where faith came in was believing that an ark would be necessary (for events yet "unseen" but certain to come). As I Peter 3:20, II Peter 2:5, and Gen. 6:1ff. state, Noah preached and worked for some 120 years about the matter. When the word of the Lord did come true, the flood came upon people who were faithless, not persuaded that God was to be trusted, and, being disobedient, all perished.

**for the saving** — The Greek term translated "saving" is *σωτηρια*, the same term as applied to salvation of one's soul, etc. In fact, Noah's faith worked salvation for him both physically and spiritually. Such was not always true of others, some of whom (as the apostle James, Stephen, etc.) were not "saved" physically though they were spiritually. God does not promise that one's faith will always or at all bring blessings in a physical/material sense. We err when we so think. It may happen — it may not. We must keep our faith in God, whatever. In so doing, like Noah, the world's disbelief is condemned while the faithful inherit righteousness.

V. 8 — **by faith . . . not knowing** — Abraham obeyed God's call because he believed God, not because he could empirically prove the promises. As Bible students know, Abraham did not receive personally any of the land which is in question, nor see fulfillment of the promised multitude of "seed." As Stephen said in Acts 7:5, he received not a "foot's length (though he bought burial ground, Gen. 23). Though the

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON HEBREWS

text states that he obeyed and went, and that he sojourned, etc., it is also a fact that he twice lied about Sarah, and attempted to have the promised son through Hagar but failed. His life was not perfect; rather it was faithful. This is why he is an example for all believers, even those to whom the epistle was first written. No one leads a perfect life — but all can lead a faithful life. In this instance, faith does not equal perfectness but loyalty. In fact, those who are mentioned in this chapter were just such people: loyally faithful to God.

V. 9 — **Isaac . . . Jacob** — Both these men were as their father and grandfather: faithful to God. In spite of occasional wrong choices, they lived a life of allegiance to God.

V. 10 — Abraham's faith in God caused him to see beyond this life so temporal and deceptive, to that life that is described as a city which God built, and therefore free from all the things that make "this city" (in this life) a thing to be avoided at all costs. (Remember Lot's wife!) One must be "in the world" but not "of the world."

V. 11 — **Sarah** — She laughed when first receiving the promise (Genesis 18:12) as did her husband (Genesis 17:17). However, both trusted God enough that God kept the promise, though the promised son's name was Isaac (= laughter).

V. 12 — **descendants . . . stars . . . sand** — While most take this to mean physical descendants, the apostle Paul specifically states that the "seed" promised to Abraham was singular, not plural, and was specifically Jesus, Galatians 3:16. Later in the same chapter, and still by inspiration, he reveals that birth into Abraham's family is counted by faith, not flesh, 3:28-29. Therefore, while it is true that many are physical descendants of Abraham, those are not what was promised. Instead, the heirs of the promise are Christians, by virtue of being in Christ. Who then can number the faithful — are they not as numberless as the stars or the sand?

V. 13 — As one reads this verse, recall v. 1 and what faith is described as being. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob — all held "title deed" to an inheritance none could empirically prove. Heaven is like that — it must be accepted as being so, on the veracity of God. If one so believes and lives, one's citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20-21) and one is truly but a foreigner and an exile here on earth.

V. 15 — Burning their bridges behind them, unlike the majority of the Israelites (ch. 3 and 4) who "burned their bridges" but later regretted it, these patriarchs struck out for a city built by God, secure in his faithfulness. For the first readers, this could have been an important point, since Judaism offered so much in a temporal way, at least on the surface. For them, Christianity was largely in promise while their present material status was not something to boast about.

V. 16 — **a better country** — Jesus said that Abraham looking ahead

“saw” by faith his coming, John 8:56; believing the gospel that was preached to him, Galatians 3:8. (Yes, the “gospel” was preached to Abraham, because the gospel is about a faith righteousness, built upon Jesus. The gospel is not the familiar “faith, repentance, etc.” These things are God’s terms to provide a way to share in the gospel.)

**God is not ashamed** — Read Matthew 10:32-33; II Corinthians 6:14 — 7:1; Philippians 2:9-11. Each of these texts highlights that which pleases God, or what displeases him. Recall Hebrews 10:31.

**a city** — This text is of the same sentiment and promises the same things as John 14:1ff. Peter and John wrote about a new city, a new heavens and earth in which God dwells, and righteousness is to be found. God keeps his promises!

V. 17 — **Abraham . . . tested** — This verse must be harmonized with James 1:12-14. As noted on 2:18, “test” and “tempt” translate the same Greek term, *πειράζω*. In the sense of James, God does not attempt to get people to sin — the devil does that. God does, however, put every man to the test of obedience to him. Indeed, as moral creatures, it is impossible not to be tested. God made us with the ability to discern differences, and the will to choose. Hence, in the ultimate sense, God places everyone in a position of testing, life-long. He so presents the choices, though, that all can choose the right, refuse the wrong. God even encourages the choice of right.

**his only son** — The R.S.V. translators have rightly rendered the Greek term *μονογενής*. It means the “only one of its kind.” Isaac was the only son of his kind, though he was not Abraham’s only son. In fact, Abraham had seven sons, one by Hagar, six by Keturah (Genesis 16:15; 25:1-2). Note the same Greek word in John 3:16 and Luke 7:12.

V. 19 — **God was able** — One can not be in God’s favor and have anyone or anything between himself and God. Abraham needed to make the choice between Isaac and God. He did, and rightly chose. In so doing, he “received” Isaac back again, and God’s personal promise as well. For him, even a resurrection was possible with his God.

V. 20 — **Isaac** — He too could not “see” the things God had promised, first to his father and then to him; Genesis 26:1-5. He may not have understood all, yet believed until his death, and so acted in the blessing of his two sons.

V. 21 — **Jacob** — As the Genesis account shows, Abraham and Jacob occupy the major portion of the whole book, overshadowing Isaac. Yet it is true that the identification of God was this: “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

**bowing in worship** — Genesis 48 and 49 have the incident in detail, but 47:29-31 also show an insight into the future, as Jacob made Joseph promise to take him out of Egypt after his death, to be buried with his fathers.

## TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON HEBREWS

V. 22 — Joseph, certainly one of God's faithful, likewise considered himself looking for a city, simply sojourning in a strange land. Greatness in the eyes of men did not hinder his greatness in the eyes of God. Hundreds of years after his death, the sons of Abraham carried his bones out of Egypt, symbolizing his choice to cast his lot with God's people. Moses, Exodus 13, and Joshua, Joshua 24, respected his faith and buried him in the land of promise.

### QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 20:

184. List those in our lesson text who lived by faith.
185. List those who did not so live.
186. How many of them were said to act by faith upon a direct revelation from God?
187. Have you ever considered that what another Christian was planning by faith was, in your judgment, foolish?
188. What is the nature of God as described in v. 6?
189. Why did God reveal to us the life of Abraham? (Read Romans 4:23-24.)
190. Would you harmonize Hebrews 11:17 and James 1:12-14, throwing in Matthew 6:13?
191. Cite an example in Joseph's life that indicates he perceived the hand of God in his circumstances.
192. How would you handle the actions of Jacob and Rebecca in regard to the blessing of Isaac — was that deception the plan of God?
193. If the death of Abraham was about 2,000 B.C., and the exodus from Egypt 1,445 B.C., how many years did the Israelites remember Joseph's request for burial in Palestine?