

# The Faith of Abraham: Introduction

## Hebrews 11:1–2

*“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.”*

### I. Introduction

#### A. False Definitions of Faith

##### 1. Faith as inner knowledge of reality (the sixth sense).

- Christians and non-Christians seem to think that faith is some inner sense of true reality. Thus people who have no particular religious identity can call themselves a person of faith.
- There are a number of reasons that this is wrong. First, it's not biblical as we will see. Second, it is rooted in just mere wishful thinking or personal presumption or such. Basically, a blind leap in the dark. And third, it is often just a cop out.
- Richard Dawkins, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”<sup>1</sup>
- This is merely trying to impose one's worldview on to reality simply because it is what one prefers. I believe this is true of Dawkins himself. He doesn't realize that he is also a man of faith in this sense. He trusts his own intuitions and reasoning about the nature or reality because he believes he is guided by objective reasoning.

##### 2. Faith as supernatural power

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<sup>1</sup> <https://crossexamined.org/the-top-five-reasons-faith-is-not-what-you-think-it-is/>

- This is Kenneth Copeland and the whole Word of Faith Movement. They believe that faith is a supernatural force that can be wielded to accomplish what they desire.
- **Matthew 21:21–22.** *"So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.'"*
- The WOF crowd really sees faith as something similar to the Star Wars force.

### 3. Faith as Virtue

- Some people think that the ability to have faith is a virtue, that faith is somehow ethical in and of itself and thus faith as faith makes you acceptable before God.
- **Hebrews 11:6.** *"But without faith it is impossible to please [God]."*
- If this were the case, then what you believe is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is whether you can demonstrate the ability to believe.
- But everyone has the ability to have faith. Everyone does it on a regular basis. We all sit in chairs that we believe will hold us. In most cases our faith is warranted but sometimes it's not. Is there any ethical value to trusting in a typical chair? Think of all the things we exercise faith in on a regular basis, whether doctors, pilots, other drivers, text messages, money, etc. There is no inherent virtue in these things. The only thing that makes that trust worthy is the object that is placed in it.
- See, it's not your ability to believe but your willingness to believe God by trusting in His promises. Just finish the verse.
- **Hebrews 11:6.** *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."*

### B. A Biblical Definition of Faith

- In order to fulfill God's call to walk by faith we need to come to a biblical view of faith. We need to define it and we need to see it exemplified.
- Today we will seek to establish somewhat of a definition and then we will turn our focus for the rest of the study to Abraham who is the father of faith. He is our example and through his life we begin to really understand what it means to live by faith.
- Beginning with a definition we turn to a popular, but very misunderstood, verse.

## II. Faith Defined

### A. The Principle of Faith

#### 1. The "substance"

- *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."*
- Understanding this text is not easy. There is a lot of debate among scholars that center around the meaning of the Greek term *hypostasis* translated here as "substance." The question is should hypostasis be translated objectively or subjectively? What's the difference?
- The NKJV is an objective translation and it gives the idea of realization, that is, that faith brings realization to the things hoped for. This gets a little sketchy with the Word of Faith people. They take it too literally. We need to be careful here.
- So should we take this as subjective? The ESV does.
- **Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)**. *"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*
- Either translation can lead to misunderstanding. If we translate this in a subjective sense we have to be reminded that faith isn't mere subjective confidence, there is an objective element.

- O'Brien says, "the exemplars of faith in Hebrews 11 had an objective hope to which they were looking forward, not simply a subjective assurance."<sup>2</sup>
- On the other hand, if we focus on the objective aspect we miss the element of confidence that is so clearly expressed elsewhere in Scripture.
- **2 Corinthians 11:17.** *"What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting."*
- **2 Corinthians 9:4.** *"... this confident boasting."*
- **Hebrews 3:14.** *"For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end,"*
- Actually we see both subjective and objective elements in Paul's example of Abraham.
- **Romans 4:16–22.** *"Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him **whom he believed**—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, **so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be."** And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and **being fully convinced** that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."*

## 2. Things not seen

- A second important consideration is the reference to "things not seen."
- We must avoid the idea that faith is some sixth sense that lets you "see" the unseen, that is, faith is not a means of knowing the unseen in and of itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 398.

- You might object and say what about verse 3?
- **Hebrews 11:3.** *"By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible."*
- Ok, so how does faith "understand"? Does it somehow convey a direct intuition of the moment of creation?
- No, we understand the creation of the world by God's Word, that is He tells us about it. We accept that explanation by faith, by trusting God's Word. The knowledge is communicated to us by the One who was actually there. He tells us how He accomplished it.
- And when it comes to faith seeing the unseen this typically refers to things not seen yet.
- **Hebrews 11:7.** *"By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith."*
- It is this "not yet seen" aspect that becomes so important for us. It means that faith is directed at God's promises.

## B. The Reward of Faith

- **Hebrews 11:2.** *"For by it the elders obtained a good testimony."*
- There is a purpose to faith. Notice what this verse indicates, that by faith the elders, that is OT saints, obtained a good testimony.
- **Hebrews 11:4.** *"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks."*
- **Hebrews 11:5–6.** *"By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, "and was not found, because God had taken him"; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is*

*impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."*

- **Hebrews 11:32–40.** *"And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us."*

- Notice that they accomplished many things by faith but had not yet received the fullness of the promise.

- **Romans 8:22–26.** *"For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."*

- So just like the OT saints our faith has an objective aspect, that is, there are present realizations of what is promised, i.e. the firstfruits of the Spirit, but yet we are still looking in hope for that which is not yet.
- And notice the emphasis on endurance. True faith does bring to realization some aspects of the promises salvation, but there is also an aspect of enduring faith, that is a waiting faith that rests in the promise yet to be fulfilled.

- **Hebrews 6:11–12.** *“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*
- This brings us full circle. We plucked our text today out of mid-air, giving no immediate context and no broader context. Let’s get a little bit of that now.
- **Hebrews 10:35–11:2.** *“Therefore do not cast away **your confidence**, which has great reward.*
- Here again we see the objective and the subjective.
- **Isaiah 8:13.** *“The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; Let Him be your fear, And let Him be your dread.”*
- **Hebrews 10:35–11:2.** *“Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: “For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.”*

### III. Application

#### A. Lessoned to be Learned

- The world has missed construed faith. Even professed Christians have done so. Any view of faith that is 1) mere subjectivism, 2) devoid of content, and 3) not specifically centered on the work of God in Christ Jesus is spurious. It will not lead you to heaven but doom you to hell.

#### B. Principle to be Applied

- Faith is not just believing that God exists but that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. God has made promises and faith is trust in His faithfulness to fulfill those promises.

### C. Exhortation to be Heeded

- Be prepared to endure. We have the firstfruits of our salvation but the best is yet to come. We have to wait for it in the midst of trial and tribulation.