

The Book of Hebrews Year 2 Bible Study Lesson 10

Hebrews 11:11-12 Notes

Faith in the Impossible

Introduction:

(A.W. Pink) In Hebrews 11 :11-12 the writer calls attention to the marvelous power of God-given faith to exercise itself in the presence of most discouraging circumstances, persevere in the face of the most formidable obstacles, and trust God to do that which unto human reason seemed utterly impossible. They show us that this faith was exercised by a frail and aged woman, who at first was hindered and opposed by the workings of unbelief, but who in the end relied upon the infinite truth of God and rested upon His promise. They show what an intensely practical thing faith is: that it not only lifts up the soul to heaven, but is able to draw down strength for the body on earth. They demonstrate what great endings sometimes issue from small beginnings, and that like a stone thrown into a lake produces ever-enlarging circles on the rippling waters, so faith issues in fruit which increases from generation to generation.

The more Hebrews 11:11 is pondered, the more evident will it appear the faith spoken of is of a radically different order from that mental and theoretical faith of cozy-chair dreamers. The “faith” of the vast majority of professing Christians is as different from that described in Hebrews 11 as darkness is from light. The one ends in talk, the other was expressed in deeds. The one breaks down when put to the test, the other survived every trial to which it was exposed. The one is inoperative and ineffectual, the other was active and powerful. The one is unproductive, the other issued in fruits to the glory of God. Ah, is it not evident that the great difference between them is, that one is merely human, the other Divine; one merely natural, the other altogether supernatural? This it is which our hearts and consciences need to lay hold of and turn into earnest prayer.

It is not that any Christian lives a life of perfect faith---only the Lord Jesus ever did that. No, for in the first place like all the other spiritual graces, it is subject to growth (2 Thess. 1:3), and full maturity is not reached in this life. In the second place, faith is not always in exercise, nor can we command its activities: He who bestowed it, must also renew it. In the third place, the faith of every saint falters at times: it did in Abraham, in Moses, in Elijah, in the apostles. The flesh is still in us, and therefore the reasonings of unbelief are ever ready (unless Divine grace subdue them) to oppose the actings of faith. We are not then urging the reader to search in himself for a faith that is perfect, either in its growth, its constancy or its achievements. Rather are we to seek Divine aid and make sure whether we have any faith which is superior to what has been acquired through

religious education; whether we have a faith which, despite the struggles of unbelief, does trust the living God; whether we have a faith which produces any fruit which obviously issues from a spiritual root.

(J. MacArthur) Faith is powerful. Faith sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, touches the intangible, and accomplishes the impossible. Unfortunately, some faith is all talk and never really gets down to action. True faith is active, powerfully active. God's power and will are on one side and man's trust is on the other. Whatever we know to be God's will, faith has the power to accomplish.

Abraham and Sarah's Story:

(J. MacArthur) Faith was active in the miracle of Isaac's birth. From the human standpoint, it was impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child. Not only had Sarah always been barren (Gen. 16:1), but by the time she was ninety years of age she was far beyond the proper time of life for childbearing. Yet at that age she conceived and gave birth to the promised son (Gen. 21:2).

(J. MacArthur) The Genesis account gives no indication that Sarah ever showed much faith in God. Both Abraham and Sarah, on different occasions, had laughed at God's promise of a son in their old age (Gen. 17:17; 18:12), but Sarah had even taken matters into her own hands by persuading Abraham to have a son by her maid, Hagar (Gen. 16:14). She did not trust God's promise and was bent on doing things her own way, which, she soon found out, was not the way either of obedience or of happiness. Her idea and Abraham's consent produced a son, Ishmael, whose descendants from that day to this have been a plague on the descendants of the son of promise. Ishmael became the progenitor of the Arabs and every Jew since his birth has faced the antagonism of the Arab world because of Abraham's and Sarah's disobedience. Sarah's impatience was costly.

(A.W. Pink) "By faith also Sarah herself received strength." The word "herself" is emphatic: it was not her husband only, by whose faith she might receive the blessing, but by her own faith that she received strength, and this, notwithstanding the very real and daunting obstacles which stood in the way of her exercising it.

Obstacle 1: Sarah had been barren her whole life (Gen. 11:30; 16:1)

Obstacle 2: Sarah was past age of childbearing (Gen. 17:17)

Obstacle 3: Abraham later was unable to procreate (Heb. 11:12; Rom. 4:19)

Obstacle 4: Unbelief interposed, persuading Sarah and Abraham that it was against nature for them both to be able to procreate (Gen. 18)

Sarah's laughter was that of doubting and distrust. ***The Lord said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind the Lord. . . . Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure,***

my lord being old also?" And the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?' Is there anything too difficult for the Lord! At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." Sarah denied it however, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh."

Varied are the lessons which may be learned from the above incident. Many times the Word does not take effect immediately. It did not in Sarah's case: though afterward she believed, at first she laughed. It was only when the Divine promise was repeated that her faith began to act. See here that before faith is established often there is a conflict: "shall I have a child when I'm old?" --- reason opposed God's promise. When the heart discerns the Word of God there is generally doubting and fear. Once more; observe how graciously God hides the defects of His children; nothing is said of Rahab's lie (Heb. 11:31), of Job's impatience (James 5:11), nor here of Sarah's laughing.

God is Faithful to Give Strength and Power:

(A.W. Pink) Let us next consider what is here ascribed unto the faith of Sarah 'by faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive (Heb. 11:11).' She obtained that which previously was not in her: there was now a restoration of her nature to perform its normal functions. Her dead womb was supernaturally revived. In response to her faith, the Omnipotent One (All-Powerful) did for Sarah what He had done to Abraham in response to his trusting of Him: ***"(as it is written, "A Father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist (Rom. 4:17).*** All things are possible with God; how blessedly and strikingly does the incident now before us illustrate this! That it may speak unto each of our hearts and cause us to long after and pray for an increase of our faith. What is more glorifying to God than a confident looking to Him to work in and through us that which mere nature cannot produce.

We do not wish to convey the impression that the only application unto us of these words, "By faith also Sarah herself received strength, " has reference to the reviving of the physical body: not so, though that is, undoubtedly, the first lesson to be learned. But there is a higher significance too. Many Christians feel spiritual weakness: instead of this hindering it should rouse to lay hold of the Lord's strength (Isa. 27:5). In the final analysis, it is nothing but lack of faith which so often allows the "flesh" to hinder us from bringing forth the Gospel-fruits of holiness. Despair not of personal frailty, but go forward in the strength of God: "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might" (Eph. 6:10); turn this into believing prayer for Divine enablement.

Does the reader still say, "Ah, but such an experience is not for me; alas, I am so unworthy, so helpless; I feel so lifeless and listless." So was Sarah! Yet, "by

faith she received strength.” And, dear friend, faith is not occupied with self, but with God. “Abraham considered not his own body” (Rom. 4:19), nor did Sarah. Each of them looked away from self, and counted upon God to work a miracle. And God did not fail them: He is pledged to honor those who honor Him, and nothing honors Him more than a trustful expectation. He always responds to faith. There is no reason why you should remain weak and listless. True, without Christ you can do nothing; but there is an infinite fullness in Him (John 1:16) for you to draw from. Then from this day onwards, let your attitude be “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). Apply to Him, count upon Him: “my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1)

Endurance and Perseverance of Faith:

(A.W. Pink) Faith is to be exercised not only in acts of worship, but in the ordinary offices of our daily affairs. We are to eat and drink in faith, work and sleep in faith. True faith not only appropriates His promise, but continues resting on the same till that which is believed be actually accomplished. The principle of this is enunciated in Hebrews; ***‘For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,’ (Heb. 3:14); ‘For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised’ (Heb. 10:36).*** It is at this point so many fail! They endeavor to lay hold of a Divine promise, but in the time of testing let go of it.

Sarah’s story is recorded for our encouragement. It shows us that no difficulty or hindrance should cause a disbelief of the promise. God is not tied down to the order of nature, nor limited by any secondary causes. He will turn nature upside down rather than not be as good as His Word. These people of faith should arouse the Christian to wait upon God with full confidence in the face of the utmost emergency. The greater the obstacles which confront us, faith should be increased. The trustful heart says, “Here is a fit occasion for faith; now that all creature-streams have run dry is a grand opportunity for counting on God to show Himself strong. What can He not do!”

“Because she judged Him faithful who had promised.” Here is the secret of the whole thing. God is faithful: she was assured that He would make good of His Word, on which He had caused her to hope. Because she judged Him faithful who had promised.” Let it be carefully noted that Sarah’s faith went beyond the promise. While her mind dwelt upon the thing promised, it seemed to her altogether incredible, but when she took her thoughts off all secondary causes and fixed them on God Himself, then the difficulties no longer disturbed her: her heart was at rest in God. She knew that God could be depended upon: He is faithful, able, willing, sure to perform His Word. Sarah looked beyond the promise to the Promiser, and as she did so all doubting was stilled. It is the heart’s contemplation of the perfections of God which causes faith to prevail.

John Owen has stated, “The formal object of faith in the Divine promises, is not the things promised in the first place, but God Himself in His essential excellencies, of truth, or faithfulness and power.” Nevertheless, the Divine perfections do not, of themselves, work faith in us; it is only as the heart believingly ponders the Divines attributes that we shall “judge” or conclude Him faithful that has promised. It is the man whose mind is stayed upon God Himself, who is kept in “perfect peace” (Isa. 26:3): that is, he who joyfully contemplates who and what God is that will be preserved from doubting and wavering while waiting the fulfillment of the promise.

Conclusion:

(A.W. Pink) But let our final thought be upon the rich recompense whereby God rewarded the faith of Sarah. The opening “Therefore” of verse 12 points the blessed consequence of her relying upon the faithfulness of God in the face of the utmost natural discouragements. From her faith there issued Isaac, and from him, ultimately, Christ Himself. And this is recorded for our instruction. Who can estimate the fruits of faith? Who can tell how many lives may be affected for good, even in generations yet to come, through your faith and my faith today! Oh how the thought of this should stir us up to cry more earnestly “Lord, increase our faith” to the praise of the glory of Thy grace: Amen.

References:

Arthur W. Pink Commentary on the Book of Hebrews
John MacArthur Commentary of the Book of Hebrews
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Map: Pintrest

