

## THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART XII

### FAITH AND THE HEROES OF OLD

I. The letter then begins the last major section, whose subject is on the importance of faith in the unseen realm that God has promised. It focuses on how the great figures of Israeli history placed faith in the promises of God despite the fact that they did not see the fulfillment, which would come only with Christ.

A. This part begins with an introduction that gives a brief description of faith as the realization (or substance; in Greek, hypostasis) of things one hopes for and conviction (or proof, in Greek elengchos) about things unseen.

- The letter focuses on the fact that faith of its nature involves the unseen realm.

- St. Paul does say in 1 Corinthians that faith continues even in heaven, where one sees God. See 1 Cor. 13:12-13. However, here the focus is on the sort of faith we have on earth, which of its nature involves the unseen, or as 1 Corinthians describes it, the vaguely seen. See also 1 John 3:1-2. Otherwise, there would be no merit in it.

- The idea is that belief in the seen is not as meritorious because it is either obvious (e.g. the existence of tangible things) or not as selfless as true faith (e.g., the belief that one will receive a material reward for efforts.) But faith is also certain, unlike belief in other unseen things, such as political views or predictions about the future. Thus, faith is both fully certain and fully free. And that is why the ancients are praised for it.

- The opening lines do not describe what hope is, except to say that it is inexorably bound up in faith. But the whole section will flesh out the idea that hope is the trust in God's promises, even when one does not see the fulfillment now. Faith is more of a belief in unseen things in general; hope is a trust that, with the grace of God, one can enter into the promise of those things.

B. The letter goes on to say that we cannot see the most crucial things in life, i.e. the source of the heroism of the "ancients" and the way in which the universe is ordered.

- This section focuses on the former aspect, i.e., the faith of the ancients. However, behind that faith is a trust, or hope, in

the providence of God, which orders the universe and rewards the just. This order and justice was a common theme of Jewish thought around the time of Jesus. See, e.g., Prov. 3:1-13, 8;22-9:18; Sir. 4:1-11; Wis. 3:1-12, 10:-11:1; see also Rom. 1:20-23.

C. Part of the idea of focusing on the unseen realm is to reiterate the fact that the visible elements of the Jewish faith, such as the sacrifices, the rites, and especially Jerusalem and the Temple, are all but signs of the greater invisible reality that God calls us to. This theme also builds upon the instructions of Christ to put faith in true treasures in heaven rather than corruptible and temporary treasures on earth. See Matt. 6:19; see also Rev. 3:18. The letter made this point earlier in saying that the earthly worship is but a sign of the "true" that is, more real, worship in heaven that we are now invited to. See Heb. 8:2, 9:24.

II. The letter then proceeds into the first of two subsections, each of which first describes some of the great figures of old and then summarizes the meaning of their actions.

A. The letter fittingly begins with Abel, whose sacrifice was acceptable, while Cain's was not, possibly because Cain did not offer the best of his produce.

- Jewish literature generally considered Abel to be a model of piety. The letter points out that Abel did not seem to receive a reward for his actions, except the reputation they would bring him after his death.
- This reputation, which in a sense allows Abel to live on, is a good (although not best) motivation to suffer. The point here may be that, even at a basic level, the unseen reputation one will have is greater than the rewards which are seen. All the more, therefore, is the even greater reward from God Himself.
- Jesus identifies Abel as the first martyr. See Matt. 23:35. He is thus is also a fitting model for Christians who are persecuted for offering sacrifices.

B. This section then moves on to Enoch, the mysterious figure who was "walked with God." For all other figures, Genesis says plainly that they died, while for Enoch the Bible says that he "walked with God," a phrase that is generally thought to mean he did not die. See Gen. 5:24. The letter explains that Enoch was taken up to God without death.

1. Among the early figures in Genesis, Enoch's life is fairly short, at 365 years. But despite the shorter life on earth, he is

the more blessed, thus becoming an image for Christians who were losing their place in the world

2. The letter states plainly that it was not just the sacrifices and righteousness, but the faith that Abel had that led to his reward of being taken up without death.

3. At the time, Jewish thought exalted Enoch as the model of all righteousness. See, e.g., Sir. 44:16; the Apocalypes of Enoch.

4. The letter likewise sees in Enoch a model of faith, which means not only a belief in an almighty God, but also a trust that He rewards those who seek Him, i.e., desire a relationship with Him.

- The likes of Aristotle and Plato, and even many pagans believed in an Almighty God, called such things as the Perfect Form or the Unmoved Mover, but not in His love or concern for us. Faith impels one to trust in God and to seek Him out in love.

C. The letter then describes Noah, who trusted when God told Him of the flood.

1. The letter paradoxically says that it was not only God, but even Noah, who condemned the world. Part of the idea is perhaps that the worship of God leads to judgment coming upon the world.. See, e.g., Ps. 98.

- St. Thomas Aquinas also says that his righteousness make more clear the world's unrighteousness.

2. The flood is a particularly apt symbol of what was soon to happen, i.e. the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation.

- But because of the flood, Noah received in a sense the whole world, now purified, as his inheritance. The implication is that Christians who seek refuge in the new ark, that is, in the grace won by Christ, will survive all the tribulations and receive a great and glorious inheritance.

D. At the end of this subsection, as well as the beginning the next, the letter focuses the figure of Abraham, our father in faith. See Gal. 3:1.

1. This subsection emphasizes the fact that Abraham was willing to leave his native land for an unseen one and that he and Sarah believed God's promises that they would have a son. Elsewhere, St. Paul's letters refer to Abraham as a model of faith. See, e.g., Rom. 4; Gal. 3:7-14

- It is noteworthy that Sarah initially did not believe that she would have a son. See Gen. 16:2, 18:12-15. The letter indicates that Sarah later came to believe.

- Abraham at first went with his father Terah to Canaan, although Terah died before they made it all the way. St. Thomas explains that Abraham probably would have returned to his home at Ur if he had not trusted in God, especially because he did not know his way in Canaan. Returning back to Ur would be an image of returning back to the world one knows, rather than setting forth on the journey with Christ.

- The reward was that nations come from him. The letter emphasizes this reward, rather than the land, because Abraham did not see the land he was to inherit. By contrast, even when Isaac was born, Abraham did not see the fullness of the promise.

2. Likewise, the letter indicates that going forth into the journey of faith will involve much that is unknown, but the promise is certain, and the rewards greater than can be counted. See 2 Cor. 5:6-7.

3. Jesus does say elsewhere that Abraham "rejoiced to see My day." But he rejoiced seeing the day of the Lord from afar; he had not nearly arrived.

E. This subsection then concludes by indicating that all of these great figures of lived in the context of the promise as travelers.

- The image the author wishes to raise up is that we are pilgrims on this earth who do not have a fixed home here, but rather see all the good things of this earth as only stops along the way to a greater and glorious land. See, e.g., Eph. 1:19-20; Phil. 3:20.

- The letter draws upon the image of making God proud of His people by faithfulness in the midst of distress and of receiving a glorious inheritance from Him. See Luke 9:23-26.

III. The next subsection then focuses on the courage and triumph over the world that comes from faith.

A. It first goes back to Abraham, stressing God's call to sacrifice Isaac.

- The letter indicates that Abraham's response is not just a matter of obedience but also faith that God would raise Isaac up from the dead. Thus, God's commandments would appear, not vicious, but rather demanding of faith.
- Isaac thus becomes a symbol (parabole) of Christ, who is the only begotten Son of the Father, and who carried the wood of His sacrifice up a hill. But that time God did allow the sacrifice and raise His Son.

B. Curiously, the letter then refers to Isaac's faith as leading to the blessing conferred on Jacob and Esau, the blessing Jacob conferred on the sons of Joseph, and the vision of Joseph regarding the Exodus.

- The letter assumes that the reader knows that Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing for the first born. See Gen. 27:27-29. However, all the figures involved had faith enough to know that the blessings were of crucial value, even though the effect was not immediately seen. By stating that a blessing was conferred upon Esau, the letter may also be subtly indicating that the non-Jews were also blessed by Isaac, and thus share in his inheritance.
- The letter's reference to the blessings conferred on Joseph's sons, Manassah and Ephraim, is also noteworthy because neither the line of kings nor of priests came from the tribes of those sons. The land of the tribe of Ephraim would come to be the symbol for the whole northern kingdom, but usually in a negative sense, as used in Scripture. See, e.g., Is. 7:1-7; Hos. 5:3-14. However, Joshua (whose name in Hebrew is the same as Jesus) and Samuel were both of the tribe of Ephraim, and the glory of leadership and prophesy came through them. See Num. 13:8, Sam. 1:1. The implication is again that the inheritance of physical things such as land, is not importance, but rather the faithfulness, leadership and vision that Joshua and Samuel represented.

C. The letter then goes to Moses and says that his mother and he both were of great faith.

1. The connection between his mother's faith and hiding him is interesting because one would think a wise mother would do so regardless of whether she had faith, for the alternative would be her son's death.

- But perhaps there is an implication that, as Moses' mother had to let him go in order to receive him back again, so too the Jewish converts to Christianity must let their family ties go that they may save even their families from death.

2. The letter also says that Moses both suffered with the Hebrew people and fled Egypt because of his faith.

- The implication is that Moses would not have defended the Hebrew worker whose overseer he attacked and killed had he not in faith known that it was better to identify with the persecuted Hebrews than the wealthy Egyptian court. The implication for Christians is that leaving the power and wealth of this world may be a necessary cost of being identified with the people of God.

3. The reference to Moses fleeing Egypt because of faith, rather than fear of the Pharaoh is also interesting given the fact that Exodus indicates that Moses fled because the Pharaoh sought to put him to death. See Ex. 2:15.

- The idea may be that Moses, by fleeing Pharaoh, got to a state in which he need not fear him anymore. Likewise, the message to the Christians is to separate oneself from the concerns of the world that Egypt represents and then one will no longer be afraid of the threats of the world. See, e.g., Matt. 5:31.

D. The subsection then refers in rapid succession to the harlot Rahab, to four of the judges and the David, Samuel, and the prophets.

1. The reference to David, Samuel and the prophets indicates that these great figures of Israeli history placed their faith in the unseen realm, even as they lived in the one that is seen.

2. The reference to Rahab is a curious one given that she was largely acting in her own interest and in that of her family, rather than any real righteousness.

- But the letter indicates that even that limited faith was enough to save her from the destruction impending on her city. All the more, the letter implies, does true faith in Christ lead to salvation in the midst of the world's destruction.

3. The four other figures from the book of Judges are also mixed figures.

- Gideon was a great, but very reluctant leader, demanding several signs before he would trust the mission the angel gave him. See Judges 6:11-24, 33-40. Gideon did manage to defeat the Midianites, who were in the tens of thousands, with three hundred soldiers.
- When Deborah, the only woman judge in the Book of Judges, appointed Barak to fight the Canaanites; and he did so, but hesitatingly.
- Samson certainly had self-confidence, but little self-control as he acted continually with anger and was foolish in revealing his secrets to Delilah. See Judges 13-16.
- Jephthah is perhaps the strangest of all, for while he did successfully fight the Ammonites for Israel, he also sacrificed his daughter because of a rash vow that he took. See Judges 11.

4. There may be an implication that the Old Covenant involved such mixed figures, and yet even their faith was admired. The idea is that all the more should the New Covenant won by Christ be worth sacrificing all things for.

E. The subsection then concludes with rapid references to all sorts of afflictions and deaths that the heroes of the Israelite people suffered. It says that through them all they remained victorious, both those such as Daniel who were saved physically because of their faith and those who were put to death, for the nation and the promises that they fought for lived on.

F. The letter says that none of them, not even those who had glory in this world received the final things promised.

- The idea is that those such as David and Daniel who received glory knew that it was only an image of the good things to come. And those who suffered death were taken out of a world unworthy of them, for a greater realm.
- The idea is that, by remaining faithful to Christ, the Christians will remain faithful to all of the glorious promises given to the Israelites and before them to all the just going back to Abel. Thus remaining with the Christians would not mean turning away from their heritage, but fulfilling it.