

Faith is...

- ✦ certainly hopeful (vv.1-3)
- ✦ ignorantly obedient (v.8)
- ✦ strangely looking forward (vv.9f)
- ✦ impossibly productive (vv.11f)
- ✦ successfully pilgrim (vv.13-16)

In the name of the LORD *El Shaddai*, almighty God of Abraham, dear fellow heirs of the promise:

Many have tried to define **Faith**. For most it's some vague confidence in themselves or chance or government to fix all their problems. They claim a "blind leap of faith," just hoping things go right. Unfortunately, most end up with "faith" that's no more certain than driving into dark flood waters having "faith" you won't drown. Meanwhile, *Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill [God] treasures up His bright designs And works His sov'reign will.* (TLH 514:2, William Cowper).

One pastor observed: "Faith is active, profound, and powerful. If a person were to describe faith correctly, he would say it's a process, not a result. In other words, faith changes the heart and mind."¹ This Great Faith Chapter of the Bible (Hebrews 11) is where the Holy Spirit enlightens us. **Faith is...**

✦ certainly hopeful (vv.1-3)

Here in the Holy Spirit's definition you readily see how **Faith is** more than a feeling, truly active. "*Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.*" (EHV²) Some Christians can remember what it was like before they had faith. They deeply appreciate this miracle when suddenly their whole outlook changed. God's Word has its own power to convince us that God is doing things we'd never think of or have the ability to carry out. One woman in Shoreview told me she did not believe in God until she held her first child in her arms. Suddenly all she had heard of God's Word was confirmed by the awesome miracle childbirth. Other heroes of faith are witnessed in Hebrews 11 along with Abraham. "*For by this faith the ancients were commended in Scripture.*" Keep reading the Bible and it finally convinces you of beginnings far more awesome than accidental evolution from a *Big Bang of who knows what from who knows where.* "*By faith we know that the universe was created by God's word, so that what is seen did not come from visible things.*" We confess God's functioning creation, soon to be clothed again in brilliant Fall colors. **Faith is...certainly hopeful.**

✦ ignorantly obedient (v.8)

Don't confuse ignorance with stupidity. "Ignorant" just means you don't have all facts yet. Abraham proved he was not stupid when he rescued Lot in the first documented night attack. Yet we see in Abraham **Faith is...ignorantly obedient.** "*By faith Abraham obeyed...*" Literally, he *listened under* much like Mary sitting at Jesus feet and listening as she put her own opinions and her sister's objections all under Christ. "*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance, and he left without knowing where he was going.*" He would spend his life in the Promised Land of Canaan never owning a spot to stand except the cemetery he bought for his family.

We miss what a shocking change this was. Your biggest change might be coming home to find the city cut down diseased ash trees. If you have to evacuate for a hurricane, you still plan to come back hoping your home is all right. But Abraham had to leave everything, completely in the dark about where God was taking him. Yet he obeyed "*By faith...*" He was ignorant of the details, but knew very well the faithfulness of God's promise. It would be centuries before his promised Seed, the Christ of God, came to

¹ Luther, Martin. Quoted in *By Faith Alone – on Hebrews 11:9*. Copyright © 1998. www.Laridian.com.

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2017. NPH: 800-662-6022; also Amazon-Kindle.

be crucified, to rise again and ascend to God's right hand – all as promised. "With closed eyes he [Abraham] hid himself in the darkness of faith, and there he found eternal light."³

✠ strangely looking forward (vv.9f)

Abraham's faith surpassed empty hopes. He was a refugee looking far beyond the land of Canaan where he walked on earth. *"By faith he lived as a stranger in the Promised Land, as if it did not belong to him, dwelling in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."*

God said the whole land belonged to Abraham. In a similar way He tells us as Christians today, *"All things are yours."* (1 Corinthians 3:21 NIV84) Since everything actually belongs to God our Father and Creator, it all belongs to His children too. Presently we are not allowed to use what's ours, much like Abraham had to live *"as if it did not belong to him."* His faith could see beyond this tenting sojourn to the glorious gates of the heavenly Jerusalem. It's described in Revelation 21:14f as having *"twelve foundations"* made of precious stones. The words of Jesus come to mind from today's Gospel: *"Do not be afraid, little flock, because your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom."* (Luke 12:32ff) Like father Abraham we can afford to be generous. Earth's riches are passing away. Their value in heaven is no more than concrete and asphalt. So strange, yes! Because **Faith is...strangely looking forward.**

✠ impossibly productive (vv.11f)

"By faith Abraham also received the ability to conceive children, even though Sarah herself was barren and he was past the normal age, because he considered him faithful who made the promise.¹² And so from one man, and he as good as dead, descendants were born as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand along the seashore." The ability to conceive which God gave Abraham and Sarah (100, 90 respectfully) is the same word from which we get "dynamite." It's in my Confirmation verse: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."* (Romans 1:16 NIV84) It takes God's awesome power to convince any of us to believe.

After Abraham rescued Lot, God came with a special assurance: *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."* More than military victory, Abraham wanted that promised heir through whom his Savior would come. But God first assured him that God Himself is our greatest treasure. What an illustration! Look at the stars. Count them if you can. So shall your offspring be. *"Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD credited it to him as righteousness."* **Impossibly productive!**

✠ successfully pilgrim (vv.13-16)

Such **Faith is...ours** as we press on like Abraham, **successfully pilgrim.** All this because God is faithful. *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8:32 NIV84) Even if we don't get to see it!

"One by one, all of these died in faith, without having received the things that were promised, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.¹⁴ Indeed, people who say things like that make it clear that they are looking for a land of their own.¹⁵ And if they were remembering the land they had come from, they would have had an opportunity to return.¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better land—a heavenly one. For that reason, God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he prepared a city for them."

"Bless the LORD, O my soul. All that is within me, bless his holy name.² Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—³ who pardons all your guilt, who heals all your diseases." My cousin Rachel's pastor said he wondered when she chose this text for her funeral, "Doesn't she realize she's terminal?" Then it dawned on him: "This is resurrection faith." Looking always toward heaven, **Faith is...successfully pilgrim.** *"Fear not...for I am your God."* (Isaiah 41:10) And **Faith** says, "Amen!"

³ Luther, Martin. Quoted by H. Sasse in essay on "Luther's Theology of the Cross." [See LW, Vol. 3, on Ge 17:16.]