

Bible reflection on Hebrews 11:1-12

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Faith in Practice: Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham

This conference is two days old and has been a reality only since we all arrived here at High Leigh Sunday afternoon. But it has affected our lives for much longer. It has determined what appointments we made, what our summer plans looked like. For some of us it has been the reason for how we at least for the last 4 months managed our other responsibilities. It has given us anxiety and at times nightmares but also great expectation and joy as we saw the program come together and registrations submitted. The conference was not yet a reality but without any doubt it already had an affect on our lives.

I trust you can see where I am going with this. This is the first of three Bible reflections on Hebrews 11, where we will have the privilege of spending time in the company of people whom we often refer to as the “heroes of our faith”. Personally, I enjoy and am energized by listening to and spending time with people who have walked with the lord for a long time and laboured in his vineyard. I like to listen to their success stories but I am just as challenged by their struggles and the times when they were about to quite. Then I recognize myself but I also get a glimpse of the faithfulness of our lord, the Lord of our faith, and the one who fulfils our faith. I meet some of my faith heroes also at a conference like this one.

The people we meet in Hebrews 11 are people whose lives were determined by something that were not yet a reality. But they lived the way they did – in the present - because they based their actions on something still to come – in the future. They were certain of what they had not yet seen.

I have the privilege of introducing you to the first four of these heroes of faith, but before you are to meet Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham, we need to understand why it is that the author of the letter to the Hebrews chooses to remind his readers – and us - of these faith heroes and what it is he wants his readers to remember about them.

Just before chapter 11 the authors reminds his readers – and he includes himself - of who they are or rather, who they are *not*. He says, “We are not of those who draw back to perdition. We are not those who shrink back and are destroyed. But we are of those who believe to the saving of souls. We are those who have faith and preserve their souls.” (cf. Heb 10:39) “We,” meaning us to whom God has spoken not only through the fathers and the prophets but here in these last days even by his son, Christ, the Messiah and high Priest, as we read in Hebrews 1.

It all sounds very good but let’s not get fooled: When we have to underscore what we are *not* it is often because we are in danger of being exactly that which we say we are not. And that was the situation for those to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written. They are reminded of and encouraged to remember the former days (10:32-35), the beginning of their walk with the Lord; the time when they first put their trust in him and came to faith – or came to believe in him. They need to remember that even then life was not easy. Actually, it was quite the opposite. It was a time of great conflict and suffering; they were made a laughing stock among others, a public joke. They had their property stolen or confiscated; they friends were put in jail. But in spite of all that they did not give up on them, rather they sympathized with them and went to see them in jail. They did not mind

the hard times and even though coming to faith in Jesus as Messiah and high priest didn't make these difficulties disappear – rather it was part of the reason for their hardship; it did not make them shrink back. And why was that? They knew they had something better to come, something lasting. It was not theirs yet in the sense that they could put their hands – or eyes - on it. But they had the promise and that promise determined their presence. It was not yet a reality but it already had an affect on their lives. Their present was determined by something yet to come. That is how it was when they first came to faith, but now it seems such a long time ago. They are about to give up and to shrink back.

It is into such a situation the author says, “Don't give up! Don't throw away your confidence, because it has a great reward.” He then encourages them to persevere, to endure, or *to put their faith into actions*. How does one do that? In Heb 10:36 we read what it is we need to do in order not to throw away our confidence and lose the reward. It says “For you need endurance so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” In order to understand what the author means by that we need to look at the quote from Hab. 2:3. It talks about the one who is coming, one who will not delay and how the righteous one of God will live by faith. It talks about faith in the one who is coming and who will not delay. In other words, what the author is saying is, “Fix your eyes on Jesus!”

We, says the author, are those who don't shrink back, but live by faith. As we heard about it in the Bible reflections yesterday from Heb 12, we run with perseverance by looking to Jesus – the coming one – the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who endured so much more than we will ever have to face. The author could have jumped from Heb 10 to Heb 12 as far as his argument goes, but in stead he pauses to remind us of these faith heroes who not only had *come to faith*, but who also had *put their faith into practice* by holding on to the God's promise and looking to the fulfilment of that promise. They are examples of what the author has in mind when h talks about “those who have faith and are saved” (10.39). And we now have a great excuse to spend some time with these heroes to listen to and learn from them.

The principle of faith - Heb 11:1-3

Heb 11:1 is a verse that many of us have learned by heart. The way we quote it probably reflects the Bible translation our Bible teacher used when we first had to memorize it. We sometimes refer to it as a *definition* of what faith is. But as we read on in chapter 11 we see that the author is not as concerned about a definition as he is about showing how faith operates, how faith works and how we put our faith into actions – so that we don't give up or shrink back. The first 3 verses give us the principle of faith and then from v. 4 on we are reminded of the lives of people who put their faith into practice. They did so as they looked to the promise, looked to the one who was coming, Jesus, the perfecter of their faith – or the fulfilment of their faith.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for– as the NIV translation has it – but faith is more than a feeling of assurance. It is the reality of what we hope for. Faith is the substance – and the evidence - of things hoped for but not yet seen, as it reads in the King James translation. In the beginning of Hebrews (1:3) we read that Jesus is the reflection – or the radiance - of Gods glory, the imprint of God's being. In the same way faith is the substance or the reality of what we are hoping for, even though we have not yet seen it. Faith makes real what we have not yet seen. Our faith looks to what is to come and makes it a reality of how we live our lives today. We live and act today based on the assumption that what God has said will indeed happened. That is how the people, our ancestors, before us lived says v.2 and thereby they received their approval – or gained a good testimony.

They were looking to the fulfilment of the promise, to Jesus and his first coming. How much more should we, who look to his second coming and already know of his first and know it to be real.

In verse 3 we then get an example of this principle of faith. In the creed we say that we believe in God, the creator of heaven and earth. It is something we accept by faith. Regardless of what our theory of creation is, it is a theory and we accept it by faith. We did not see it but in our daily lives today we operate under the assumption that this is how it is: That the world we live in came into existence by the spoken word of God, the creator of heaven and earth. This is faith in principle, the principle by which our fathers lived – and were accepted or commended. Faith makes real what is still to come.

Heb 11:4-12 – Faith in practice

From v. 4 and the rest of chapter 11 the author gives a list of people who acted out of faith or put their faith into practice. However, it is not just any list. It follows the Biblical narrative and in that way it tells the story of our redemption. It is no coincidence that these people are listed the way they are. They tell the story of salvation, the story that reaches its climax or leads to the fulfilment when we get to Jesus in Hebrews 12. In this way the authors underscores for us the importance of the Biblical narrative and its revelation of God through his people. It is what Moses told the Israelites to do when they were to instruct the next generation in the way of the Lord: Tell them Bible story, tell them about the Exodus, about what God has done. We shall now focus on the first four figures listed in Hebrews 11.

They are very different but they have in common that they put their faith into practice as they looked to the first coming of Jesus. We have come to faith in him whom they hoped for. We can look back to his first coming, his death and resurrection and we know what that means for how we see our lives today. As we look to his second coming, we live in light of the resurrection, the result of his first coming. His second coming is as certain as his first. As was the situation for the readers of Hebrews so our lives can be a life of struggle and suffering; we may face persecution and be ridiculed, we can risk having our churches burned down or losing our property; even losing our lives. This is not just a possibility but a reality for some of our brothers and sisters today. That is how they live their lives in light of the resurrection and in the hope of His second coming as they put their faith into practice. Let's be encouraged!

Abel who was accepted by God

This verse takes us back to Gen 4 and the story of the two brothers, Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve and the story of the two sacrifices, one that was accepted and one that was rejected. The issue, however, is not the sacrifice itself, not its quality and not its size. Many of us remember illustrations of the story from our children's Bible. It had a picture where the smoke from one altar went up and from the other it stayed on the ground. It is not that God likes meat better than a fruit offering. The Bible tells us that Abel was a shepherd and Cain tilled the soil, but Scripture also says about Abel that God accepted his sacrifice, because he was righteous. It is not the quality of the sacrifice that determines whether or not God accepts it. It has to do with the person who offers the sacrifice. We are told that Abel was righteous. He put his faith into practice or – with the words of God to Cain: he did well. Cain was told: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen 4:7). This takes us back to the quote from Hab. 2:4, repeated in Heb 10:38: "The righteous shall live by faith."

The righteous will live by faith because they look to God for their vindication. It is the persecuted and the prisoner who needs vindication and God will give it to them as they cry out to God and put

their trust in him. It then says about Abel that he “still speaks even though his dead”. Abel was murdered – by his brother. He became the first martyr. Since then there have been many martyrs and like Abel they, too, still speak today. What we have here in the last part of v. 4 is the voice of the martyrs. Like Abel they look to God for him to put things right in his time. This is also what we are reminded of in Rev. 6:9-11, where we hear the voice of the martyrs:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed

This is the substance of their faith that God in his time will vindicate them. And God will prove them right. Therefore they still speak – like Abel does.

The story of Abel leaves us with a question about our own offering to God. Is it pleasing to him? Does it reflect faith put in practice and the fact that we, too, look to God for vindication - in his way and in his time? Are we looking for success – or are we looking to him?

Enoch who was taken by God

When we get to verse 5, we are reminded of the story we read in Gen 5:21-24. Here it says about Enoch that he “walked with God” (Gen 5:22) which in Heb 11:5 gets translated into “he had pleased God”. So Enoch walked with God or – in other words - lived in a way that was pleasing to God. Enoch is a unique figure in biblical story. Almost a figure a little detached from the life of the rest of us; a category of its own. At the same time his story is also told in a very practical way. It is about walking, doing, putting faith into practice. He did what Abraham was told to do when God said to him as we read in Gen 17:1: “Walk before me.” The reason or the basis for Abraham’s doing so is the statement by which God’s command to him is introduced: “I am God, the almighty.” It is because God is who he is that Abraham is told to walk before him. It all goes back to who God is – the answer Moses was given later on when he asked for God’s name: “I am”. It is about what God has done and about what he will do. Enoch has faith in that and because of that he walked with God. He put his faith into practice. We can know that because without faith it is impossible to please God. And we are told that God was pleased with Enoch and one day “he took him”. Great expression: After 365 years God one day just took him and he was no more.

It all seems very simple and very logically: Enoch pleased God, because he had faith in God, therefore he walked with God and God took him.

How can we come to God? Or how can we come before God? This is the question the prophet Micah is asking in Micah 6:

How – or with what – can I come? With what will the lord be pleased? Should it be burnt offerings or thousands of rams, should it be my first born or the fruit of my body for the sins of my soul?

We could ask our own questions. We would not ask about what kind of offerings, but perhaps what kind of work we should be doing. Micah gives the answers in v. 8: “God has shown you, oh man,

what is good: To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your Lord.” This is faith in action. This must have been what Enoch did as he walked with God and God was pleased with him. Micah 6:8 can be seen as a description of Enoch’s life – until God took him.

This is summed up in v. 6 where we get the lesson learned from the story of Enoch: No one can please God without faith and one no one can come to him without believing in him. We say – or communicate - with your lives that we believe in him by seeking him and living lives that reflect our faith in him.

The story of Enoch leaves us with another question: If it is difficult for us to persevere or to endure, if we are tempted to shrink back and give up, or if we think the pressure is too much and the price of being a believer is too high, is it then because we no longer are walking with God? Do we need to get back to that relationship with him where we allow him to be the great “I am”, in whom we put our trust and walk like Abraham was told to in Gen 17:1, and the way in which Enoch walked? Such a walk is possible only by faith, faith put into practice where we make what we have not yet seen, because it is still to some, part of our life and reality today.

We believe that God is. Not just that he exists or that there is a god, but that he is who he says he is: “I am.” By Believing that he is trustworthy - worthy to be trusted - and that we can rely on him and live our lives based on the hope, that he is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do. We can know what he has said, because he has spoken through his prophets, but also through the heroes of faith that we read about here. When we follow that story we will eventually get to Jesus, the fulfilment and the finisher of our faith.

It says about Enoch that God took him. One day he could not be found. As a reward of his walking with God, God took him. It must mean that he took him into his presence - whatever that means. Enoch is special, and only about him do we read this. But his reward – that God took him - is the reward for all who practice the principle of faith. The Gospel, the good news is that we can live our lives with God, walk before him and live in his presence. This is what Jesus talks about in Joh. 14 when he talks about loving him:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them (Joh 14:23)

When I read these verses I am reminded of one of the residents at the Ebenezer Home in Haifa, Heinz Pollach. He is old, he is almost blind, and he lost his wife, his life’s companion for many years. And yet, this is what he told me last time, when I asked him how he was doing, indicated that life must be difficult for someone in his situation. His answer was, “Yes, it is not easy, but everyday I can enjoy being in the presence of the Lord.” Heinz has an experience of the abiding presence of the Lord in his life. This is possible because he puts his faith into practice and makes what he hopes for, that which has not yet come, a reality in his life today.

Noah – heir of righteousness

We have now come to chapter 6 in Genesis. It is the first time in the Bible that we hear about God’s righteousness – or God’s grace. It says about Noah and his family that they became heirs of righteousness – by faith. It was not so much God’s promise as it was his warning Noah believed – and acted upon. But the principle is the same. He put his trust in what God had said and what he, Noah, had not yet seen. What he believed made him act. He built the arch – at the ridicule of all

others, who lost their lives where as Noah and his family were saved – by faith. Without faith he could not have build the arch and without the arch he would not have been saved. Simple logic.

Most of you have come to England by plane: You heard the instructions by the stewardess before take off: “In case of emergency this is what you need to do” –and then come all the instructions. Fortunately none of you had to act on that instruction, but if you had to and did not do it, the consequence could have been that your lives were lost. Noah heard the warning and put the instructions into practice. He and his family were saved. The rest was not. Instead they saw the consequences of God’s judgment, his determination to make an end to all flesh or to all people. There is a combination – or a connection – between God’s salvation and God’s judgment. The outcome of God’s warning can be salvation. It was for Noah because he believed the warning. For the others the outcome was the opposite and that is destruction and judgment. Do we believe that? We say we do when we confess our faith. We have already talked about believing – or confessing our faith – in creation. In the creed we also say that we believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. What does that mean and what are the implications of that for us today? How do we practice that part of our faith? We believe in salvation. What about judgment?

Here is a question to be asked: Does our urgency – or lack of it – relate to how seriously we believe in Gods’ salvation – and his judgment?

We don’t believe in judgment. We believe in God, the God of salvation. But we know from the Bible story that judgment and salvation go together. Nowhere is this clearer than in the story of Jesus, the story of the cross. Here we see what it means that judgment is part of God’s salvation. Without judgment there would be no salvation. Our faith is in God, the God who sent Jesus to be crucified, buried and to be raised again by God from the death. He is now seated at the right hand of God the father and from there he will come again to judge the living and the dead. How does this reflect on our lives? Noah built the arch and by doing so he condemned the world, says the author of Hebrews. In John 3:16 we read: God did not sent his son into the world to condemn the world but to save it and whoever believes that is not condemned. But Joh 3:18 reads “those who do not believe are already condemned because they did not believe in the name of God’s only son.” How is this reflected on the way in which we put our faith into practice?

Abraham and what the author of Hebrews forgot to tell (v. 8-12)

We have come to Gen 12 and the story of Abraham who put his faith into practice by obeying God’s call to leave his home and go to the land God promised him and his family, the family he did not yet have but was part of God’s promise. He lived in the land – in tents – a stranger and a sojourner till his death, trusting in God’s promise and looking to what was still to come.

Are you encouraged – or scared – by these faith heroes? Let’s take a closer look at the story of Abraham. He actually set out with his father from Ur in Chaldea to go to Canaan, but for some reason they got stuck in Haran, until God called them (again). He came to Canaan but when hunger hit the country he continued on to Egypt. He had a hard time waiting for the promised son and as a result we have the story of Ishmael. None of this is mentioned in Hebrews 11, but we know from Genesis that this is also part of the story of Abraham, and more could be added.

I am sure that both the author and the readers of Hebrews knew this as well. They also knew something about Noah which does not gets mentioned. So we can ask: who is fooling who by giving us what look like a censored version of the true story? Why doesn’t the author admit that

there is more to be added? The skeletons are going to get out of the closet one day anyway. It serves no purpose to pretend.

The answer is that nobody is getting fooled. There is another reason for telling the story this way. But before we come to that let's pause and notice one thing: God's people fail and fall, big time! We could make the list even longer, Moses, David, the disciples. And we all know our own lives and the stories to be told here. Let's not fool ourselves but instead be reminded of what we also read in Hebrews, which is the key or main message in the letter. We find it in Heb 4:14-16:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Our faith is faith in him, our high priest. It is in him we put our trust and it is through that faith we can receive God's approval as stated in Heb 11:2 about those who went before us. Let us not forget what – or who – the letter to the Hebrews is all about. It is about Jesus, our great high priest, in whom we put our trust; He who knows our weaknesses and shows compassion. He forgives our sins and then he *remembers* them no more. We were reminded of this already back in Heb 10:16-17 with a quote from Jeremiah 31:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

³⁴And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (vv. 33-34)

The heroes of faith are not commended for their perfect deeds or perfect lives. They are commended for their faith. The faith they put into action by trusting in the promise of God. That he would forgive and forget.

This is the faith we are to persevere in and not shrink back from. Don't throw away that faith. Don't give up even though you face persecution. Don't give up even though your ministry is not as successful as you would like it to be or had hoped it to be. You can lose your life and Christians are doing that – even as sit here. But there is something more serious than that and we all stand in danger of it. It is losing our faith. Let's not do that! Let's be of those who believe and are saved. Let us follow the example of these faith heroes. They looked to what was yet to come. They looked to Jesus the fulfilment of their faith. And God commended them for that. Don't shrink back – don't get discouraged. His coming in glory is the substance of our faith. Let's put that into practice.

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