

## The Christian Fight (Part Three)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

*Forerunner*, "Personal," July 2007

Metaphors involving warfare abound in the Bible. New Testament writers in particular frequently draw on some form of them to illustrate Christian life. These metaphors remove any doubt that living a Christian life will not be like a Sunday walk in the park. Though the writers allude to some of the mortal dangers of war, their metaphors focus more on the stresses of struggle, deprivation, and sacrifice. Any soldier participating in warfare for the benefit of his nation and especially for his loved ones must possess some measure of devotion and determination, which are driven by his belief that his cause is just. The more these qualities reside in his character, the greater the likelihood that he will endure the trials of warfare in a hopeful spirit.

Faith dominates the picture of a Christian's fight with the spiritual forces arrayed against him. In fact, since we cannot literally see God, yet we can spiritually see and understand what He has inspired to be written, instruction regarding faith is instrumental in every aspect of a Christian's life. Faith is absolutely essential to the Christian's warfare. To love as God loves is indeed the goal of Christian life, but to reach that awesome peak, we must have a strong foundation. For a disciple of Christ, that foundation is faith.

Hebrews 11 is a classic chapter of the Bible. Though it may not be as high in public popularity as Psalm 23 or I Corinthians 13, its importance to conversion must be equal to theirs. Psalm 23 is warm and comforting, giving us assurance that God is with us regardless of circumstances, and that He will provide. In its own intimate way, it is also a strong expression of faith, touching on many areas of the Christian's fight. I Corinthians 13 provides clear word-pictures about how godly love acts and reacts, and in doing so, it sets high standards for us to pursue in emulating God in practical living.

Hebrews 12:1 exhorts, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." This verse shifts our attention to practical applications of the lessons that spring from the previous chapter's vivid illustrations of lives lived by faith.

Hebrews 11, then, is to faith what I Corinthians 13 is to love and what Psalm 23 is to encouragement. Hebrews 11 is a beckoning, guiding beacon, showing how great men and women of the past used their faith in God to achieve great things in witnessing for Him. As they overcame in their daily struggles and responsibilities, they left behind standards and examples as instruction for our spiritual well-being. In broad strokes, this chapter provides direction by illustrating circumstances in which they made practical use of their faith in God and His way.

Hebrews 11:1 states, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Understanding this verse is essential to deriving the most from this chapter. It establishes a good, practical definition of faith, but it is not the only one, since the Bible uses the term "faith" in several other ways. We have to be thinking as we read, or we may get an idea about faith other than the one God intends within a given context.

Galatians 1:23 uses "faith" in a somewhat different manner. "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." In context with "preaching," *faith*, as used in

religious parlance, means "a confession," thus "a creed," "a body of religious beliefs," or "a statement of the principles of one's way of life." The New Testament often uses "faith" in this manner. Its usage in Jude 3 is similar but a bit clearer, as a body of beliefs to which we must cling steadfastly and apply to life's challenges.

In John 20:29, the apostle relates, "Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" Here, with Jesus Christ as faith's object, believing indicates a personal trust or confidence in Him. Paul, in Romans 3:22, puts it in different light: ". . . even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe." Here, in a legal context, it indicates a level of personal confidence or trust in what Christ did as a means of justification and therefore access to God.

Romans 10:17 imparts vital understanding on how faith in God becomes part of our thinking and conduct: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Faith becomes an element of our thinking by our hearing words that concern the objects of faith: our Father in heaven; His Son, Jesus Christ; and their message, the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Interestingly, Paul emphasizes hearing rather than merely reading, though reading is included in the sense of hearing. Jesus declares in John 6:63, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." Hearing—or more correctly, listening—is probably Jesus' most frequent and consistent exhortation during His ministry.

If we do not listen thoughtfully, we will not have faith in the right object. Regardless of the context, faith always contains a mixture of believing, knowing, understanding, trusting, and sometimes even bold conviction—all locked together and pointed toward a specific object. Within the Bible, that object is almost always either God, Jesus Christ, the Word of God, or a messenger sent by God, whether angel, prophet, or minister.

## The Background

Hebrews 10:35-39 introduces the subject of faith, paving the way for Paul's exposition in chapter 11:

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.

This is not the first time faith or its opposite, unbelief, is mentioned in Hebrews. The very purpose of the entire epistle is to recapture, build, and sustain in its recipients their faith in the superiority of Jesus Christ Himself and in His message, the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Notice the strong, earlier statements Paul makes regarding unbelief:

» **Hebrews 3:12, 19:** Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. . . . So we see that [the Israelites in the wilderness] could not enter in[to the Promised Land] because of unbelief.

» **Hebrews 4:2:** For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

These are weighty statements. The Israelites failed to accomplish their responsibility of walking from Egypt to the Promised Land primarily because of one weak element in their character. They did not believe God or His messenger Moses. They did not listen thoughtfully or yieldingly.

Because of the warning contained within Hebrews 10:35-39, chapter 11 places the virtue of faith in direct contrast to the sin of unbelief by exposing what unbelief caused to occur. The Israelites drew back in fear rather than trusting God and boldly going forward. Thus, the main point of the epistle of Hebrews is that they will be destroyed who, by failing to put their trust in the living God, shrink back from this Christian war we have been called to fight, whereas those who believe will be saved.

### **Subjective or Objective?**

A clear understanding of faith in Hebrews 11 largely depends on how we perceive the word "substance" in verse 1. In Greek, it is *hypostasis*, literally "a standing under." A more complex definition is "that which underlies what is apparent." Amplified a bit further, it is that which, though unseen, exists beneath what is visible. It, then, has the sense of a foundation. Even as the foundation of a building is unseen, but the building above ground is apparent, the foundation, the *hypostasis*, is nonetheless real, supporting the building. *Hypostasis* is the unseen support of what is standing in clear view.

Spiritually, then, invisible faith underlies, supports, and thus motivates the visible action. However, that does not end the discussion of how *hypostasis* is to be understood. Should it be understood subjectively or objectively? In other words, should we consider faith to be a quality, a virtue within us (that is, subjectively), or should we understand it as something not a part of us but on which we can rely (that is, objectively)? Neither of these usages is wrong, but one seems better than the other within the context of the entire book.

If the translators believed it should be understood subjectively, then the first phrase in Hebrews 11:1 will be translated similar to, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we do not see." Another subjective variation might be, "In faith, things hoped for become a reality." This emphasizes conviction, an internal certainty about what we believe.

If the translators believed it should be understood objectively, then the same phrase will be translated, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for" or "Faith is the title deed of things hoped for." This emphasizes something outside the person that he can rely upon.

This issue is not an easy matter. However, the subjective perspective, conviction within us, is better, given the tenor of the entire epistle.

Certainly, Paul spends a great deal of time reminding the Hebrews of how great what they believe in is—that things pertaining to Christ are far better than anything ever before offered to mankind. This by itself would require an objective point of view. However, the real problem was within these Hebrews' hearts. Paul was exhorting people who were letting the things of God slip away from them

through personal neglect. It was not that they did not have something to believe in, for the epistle clearly states they had formerly done much better. Rather, through their lack of conviction, and thus their neglectful personal application, they were slip-sliding away. The real issue is subjective.

Several times, Paul urged them to recall former days and recapture the bold confidence they once had. Thus, though neither of these approaches is wrong, the subjective perspective is better, meaning Hebrews 11:1 is better translated, "Faith is being sure of what we hope for, certain of what we do not see." The believer is convinced that the things he cannot see regarding God are real, and so, from that perspective, he will act in fullness of hope.

Many claim to believe God, but what influence does this belief have on their behavior? If it wields little or no influence, they are unconvinced people, people without conviction who are seeking only an intellectual righteousness. Such belief is without certainty, and so it lackadaisically, gradually retreats instead of going forward in growth. These Hebrews had become this way under the pressure of time and trial.

### **Endure to the End**

As stated earlier, the introduction to the Faith Chapter appears in chapter 10, when the author directly mentions faith. However, a secondary subject motivated the writing of chapter 11, and this subject appears in Hebrews 10:36 as "patience," as the King James Version renders it. Ample material appears throughout the epistle to explain why patience needed to be addressed.

Although "patience" is not a wrong translation, for better understanding, more specific words should be used. Today, we generally think of "patience" as passive, whereas "persevere" or "endure" are more dynamic. The Greek word used in Hebrews 10:36 is *hupomone*. In his *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, Spiros Zodhiates comments that it means "constancy under suffering in faith and duty." "Constancy" indicates that persistent effort is being made, in this case against a pressing trouble. In light of this series, he perhaps describes it even better by defining it as a "quality of character that does not allow one to surrender."

"Perseverance," "endurance," "constancy," and "steadfastness" all have a sense of activity, of actively straining against some pressure. Thus, as Hebrews 11 begins, the author approaches two related subjects: one directly, faith or strong conviction; and the other, perseverance, less directly. *Hupomone*, however, does not appear again until Hebrews 12:1.

The Hebrews badly needed both conviction and perseverance to meet and overcome their problems. These virtues go hand in hand, and they really cannot be separated because we operate on a different concept of time than does God. Compared to God, we operate on fast time. Almost everything in our lives seems to have to be done or received right now, or faith begins to evaporate and we lose heart. True faith, though, operates in a rhythm closer to what God does because, due to conviction, it is more in tune with Him.

Therefore, a convicted person not only believes that what God says is true, but he also trusts and willingly endures trials in an attitude of realistic hopefulness. He does not restlessly complain to God to fix things right away on his schedule. A person develops conviction by thoughtfully processing a great deal of God's truth and yielding to the evidence He provides.

Paul continues in Hebrews 11:2 by noting, "For by it the elders obtained a good testimony." This sets the stage for the remainder of the chapter by showing its importance: Others we respect have lived by faith before us, and as a result, God approved of their lives.

The apostle implies that, if they could do it, why can we not do as well, since the same factors that existed for them are still working? Namely, God is still on His throne, and His truth stands firm. We should desire to please and trust no one else in the entire world above God. This is an important point regarding faith because this faith must be lived toward God.

Remember, God as a personal Being and His message given through Jesus Christ are the objects of our trust. It is easy for our attitude to be oriented toward pleasing other people. God does not deny this to us, but pleasing Him must dominate our attitude. We must choose pleasing Him as the primary desire of our lives, or conviction has little chance of growing.

In Hebrews 11:3, the apostle writes, "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." This further continues laying the groundwork, as this concept reveals the solid base of faith toward God: that He is Creator and Ruler. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God Himself demanded of Job. The answer to this question is why we can understand the existence of things by faith.

E.W. Bullinger has an additional thought on this verse that is worth considering. He takes this beyond creation, as the word translated "worlds" is literally *aiones* or "ages." Thus, the verse is literally stating that God framed or put into order the *ages*. Zodhiates agrees that *aiones* indicates ages or times, in contrast with *kosmos*, often translated as "world," which indicates people as a society. Bullinger shows that God, unseen and sovereign, is not only Creator, but also actively shapes events within the expanses of time. As Jesus says in John 5:17, God is always working, directing the movement of history to bring about His desired ends. Bullinger's approach is to be preferred as more appropriate to the entire epistle.

### **Patterns to Note**

With Hebrews 11:4, we begin to see the contrasts between faith and unbelief more clearly: "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." These contrasts are seen in the practical applications made by faithful men and women who pleased God, gaining His respect by the way they lived.

As Paul presents the examples of faithful men and women, we should notice several patterns. The first is an obvious one: The examples are arranged chronologically—up until Moses. At that point, he mysteriously skips over Joshua, but then includes Rahab. Next, he names a few judges but not in chronological order. Finally, he mentions David, Israel's second king, but before Samuel, the last of the judges.

A second and more important pattern is that each example of faith is different from any of the others, and they are arranged in a progression important to Christian living. This aspect will become more apparent as we wend our way through the examples.

The third pattern to notice is that Paul is making a general but powerful argument against the no-works doctrine of those who profess that strange and destructive concept. In each example, it is clear that faith motivated each person to do his particular cited work. The faith of these people, then, was not merely intellectual, and it most certainly was not dead. Paul is showing conclusively that what one says he believes is absolutely useless unless it pleases God by producing works. Works are the evidence that the person has faith! This is a major theme of the entire epistle.

These Hebrews claimed to be Christian, but in the face of severe trials, their lack of faith, their doubt that God would provide for them, motivated them to draw back. Their lackadaisical and fearful works exposed their lack of faith. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, they were slipping away.

The fourth pattern is that Hebrews 11 is divided into three sections. The first section is the introduction, which extends to the end of verse 3. The second section, verses 4-7, covers the examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Abel's example focuses on the genesis of Christian living, while Enoch's concentrates on the character of the life of faith, of which Christian living consists. Noah's example continues the theme of Enoch's, adding a significant work (preparing the ark) and showing the goal of Christian life. With Abel, Enoch, and Noah, Paul lays a general foundation to show how faith motivates a person's life.

The third and major section, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, focuses on what the remaining examples achieved by means of their faith in God and their always looking beyond their own time of life. This is not to say the first three did not achieve anything, only that achievement through faith was not the focus of Paul's instruction at that point.

As the Bible records history, Abel is the first human to offer a sacrifice to God. The Bible gives no indication that he was following what was then popular among the children of Adam and Eve, nor that he was following "common sense," human reason, or his feelings. Undoubtedly, God had instructed Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, and maybe others in His truth. Abel stands out because he offered by faith. He believed the specific instruction given to him, while neither Cain nor anybody else did. His motivation is what set Abel apart; he believed without twisting what God taught.

Recall that Romans 10:17 says that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Faith in God must have a foundation, and listening is the means by which that foundation is formed. At this point, it is important to understand what Paul—and of course, God—mean by "faith." There are two general kinds of faith: "dead" and "living," as James terms them.

When James calls the one "dead," he is in no way saying that whoever has that faith is stupid. In fact, they may be quite intellectual—"smart," as we might say. He means that, in relation to God, they do not have living or active faith. We can illustrate the difference this way: Suppose two people receive exactly the same instruction from the Word of God; both have been informed as to what He requires. The difference between the person with dead faith and the one with living faith is that the latter is influenced to submit to what he has learned. The one with dead faith remains only informed.

Thus, the person with dead faith may enjoy using his biblical knowledge to discuss and even to argue for or against a given concept. However, it remains only information because the influences to submit and do something in relation to God are lacking. He cannot honestly be said to believe, even though the information he has may be quite extensive and true. By contrast, the person with living faith believes and submits, making active use of the godly information to change his life.

The person with dead faith hears outwardly; the person with living faith hears outwardly and inwardly and yields to it, believing it. This latter person also has what the Bible calls "the faith." Paul writes in Galatians 5:6 that this faith works by or through love. What is love? I John 5:3 declares, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." Love is obedience to God.

Thus, living faith is belief in God that keeps the commandments. Living faith produces growth. It is this faith that is in view throughout Hebrews 11. In the case of Abel, the Word of God that he heard is most likely what God spoke to Adam and Eve. Abel, in turn, heard it from them and believed it. Cain heard the same words and was merely informed. What did they hear that pertains to Hebrews 11:4? Some of this is recorded in Genesis 3:7-19, 21:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" Then the man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." To the woman He said: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

. . . Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.

Here we have the Bible's first sermon. This is what Abel heard, believed, and submitted to. The same instruction merely informed Cain.

Adam and Eve were the first sinners to stand before God and be called into account. In this passage are four elements that apply to what Abel believed. The first element is that, in order for a sinner to stand before God, nakedness must be covered. Nakedness, both spiritual and physical, has wide usage as a symbol. At its best, it indicates innocence, child-like simplicity, and vulnerability. At its worst, it indicates humiliation, guilt, shame, and punishment. Adam and Eve were attempting to hide their humiliation, guilt, and shame when they grabbed a few fig leaves to provide covering.

An interesting spiritual lesson comes in understanding an application of the symbolism here. Adam and Eve threw together as a covering whatever was handy at the moment. What they chose to cover themselves with physically was totally inadequate as a spiritual covering. God immediately rejected their effort, which is the main instruction of this vignette.

A secondary teaching is that many carnal people today think it does not matter what they physically wear when they come before God at church services. Oh, yes, it does! These days, people arrive at church to worship wearing all kinds of casual clothing. In fact, many churches invite them to do so, advertising themselves as "casual"! Sometimes this reflects a matter of ignorance; they just do not know any better. At other times, it reveals a serious matter of disrespect for the primary covering—Christ's sacrifice, as we shall see shortly.

It is good to remember the overall principle to appear before God covered with acceptable covering. The symbolic instruction carries through to both physical and spiritual applications, and the person who cares what God thinks will do his best to conform to Him. God covered Adam and Eve with truly fine clothing. That is our example.

The second element Genesis 3 reveals takes us a step further spiritually in regard to the covering: What humans devise in terms of covering spiritual nakedness is, in reality, worthless. The third element clarifies this further: God Himself must supply the only covering that is spiritually adequate.

The fourth element is that the only adequate spiritual covering is by means of death. As in the first element, there are two lines of instruction. The first leads to the necessity of the second, if life is to continue. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The underlying principle is that we are always to give of our best to the Master. When we fail, the death penalty is imposed. This, then, brings forth a second teaching: In a spiritual sense, the entire human race sinned in Adam and Eve, who represented all mankind at the time. Since the wages of sin is death, and all have subsequently sinned, all of us must receive that wage—or another, an innocent One on whom death has no claim because He never sinned, must substitute for us.

However, we find it clearly spelled out in Romans that there must be a link between us and the Substitute. That link is faith:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. . . .

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. . . .

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. . . .

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. .

..

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 4:1-4, 11-12, 16, 19-20, 23-25; 5:1-2)

Faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the link between us and God's forgiveness, which provides the acceptable spiritual covering necessary to be received into God's presence and receive the gift of life.

The second aspect of the fourth element also involves another death—ours. In this case, it is not a literal death but a spiritual one:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? . . . knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him. (Romans 6:1-2, 6-8)

This death is achieved through repentance because one believes he is a sinner in need of God's forgiveness, having broken His law and earned death.

What we have just reviewed must have been taught to Cain and Abel, probably by Adam. How do we know this? Because Hebrews 11:4 tells us that Abel offered by faith, and faith comes by hearing. He heard the divine words given by God to Adam and Eve, which were passed to him, and Abel believed. Cain heard the same words, but did not believe as Abel did.

More proof is recorded following Cain's rejection. God says to him in Genesis 4:7, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it." God clearly indicates a choice between right and wrong. Good and evil faced Cain and Abel. The one brother by faith chose what was right in God's eyes, while the other chose what was right in his own eyes. In essence, he chose death.