

Five Stories of Faith
Andrew Kneeland, August 14, 2022
Hebrews 11:1-16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're going to talk about "faith" today. We're going to open up our dictionary of church words—the language of "Christianese"—and spend a few minutes looking at one of the most common words we use.

We talk about "faith" all the time. We have faith. God grows our faith. We walk **by** faith. We live **in** faith. When someone believes in God they come **to** faith. We talk about "faith" all the time. But what is faith?

To help answer that question, the author of this letter of Hebrews tells us five stories. Five stories of faith.

Let's pray before we dive in: Father God, this is your Word and faith only comes from you. Teach us about faith today, God, and grow us closer to you. Bless our time together this morning. In your name we pray, amen.

Abel: Our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God when they ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. As soon as they took that bite they felt shame and embarrassment.

God was also in that garden, and he went to go find his precious children to see what had happened. You remember how it went: Adam blamed his wife and she blamed the serpent. God listened to these excuses and He was undoubtedly disappointed and upset. But the first thing He did was curse the devil to an eternity of crawling on the ground. And He promised that the woman would have a child who would ultimately and finally defeat the deceptive devil.

God turned to the woman and told her that because of sin marriage and childbirth would be difficult, and often painful. He turned to Adam and told him that providing for his family and working the ground would also be difficult, and often painful.

But do you know what happened next? Adam hadn't given his wife a name yet! **After** hearing this devastating news about sin, Adam named his wife. "Eve" means "life." After God sentenced them to a deserved life of hardship, Adam

remembered God's word of promise and *trusted* that promise.

He had faith. And he and his wife taught their children about this faith, too. After they left the Garden, Adam and Eve had their first two children: Cain and Abel. The first babies.

Cain grew up working in the fields as a farmer. His younger brother Abel was a shepherd who took care of the sheep. One year, around harvest, it was time to make a sacrifice. Abel brought the best sheep he had in his flock and sacrificed it to the Lord, but Cain brought some of the vegetables from his garden as his offering.

Adam and Eve had taught their children how to love and worship God, and they had shown them the right way to make sacrifices. And Genesis 4 tells us: "The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard."

Cain had been disobedient, just like his parents in the Garden of Eden years before. Instead of repenting of his sin and trusting in God's promise, though, Cain got angry—"very angry," it says—and took his younger brother out into one of his fields and committed history's first act of murder.

But Abel's example of faith lives on. In making his sacrifice Abel remembered God's past promise of future salvation, and was trustingly obedient. And because of this faith, he was saved.

Hebrews 11, verse 4: *"**By faith Abel** offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks."*

Enoch: After the tragic death of Abel, Adam and Eve had more children. Their children had children, and those children had children of their own. Things were very different back then, in a lot of ways. God was populating the earth from two people to thousands of people, and the average lifespan was hundreds and hundreds of years.

Adam lived for 930 years before he died. His son Seth lived to be 912 years. His

son lived 905 years. His son lived 910 years. His son lived for 895 years. And on it went. These men and women of faith had a long time to wander the earth, working the ground, having babies, developing and perfecting their trades and professions. A long time to wait for the Messiah who God had promised to Eve all those years before.

But Adam was faithful. Even with the descendants of Cain forming a separate branch of this early family tree, Adam taught his family to be faithful. Genesis 4 says that when Adam was 235 years old he met his grandson, and the believing family started to preach. The world population was exploding and even just a few hundred years after Adam and Eve had left the perfect Garden of Eden, the world was becoming more and more sinful and wicked.

With each generation, more and more people forgot about God's promise and started to do life on their own; trying to make their own way. Shortly before Adam died he had the chance to meet his great-great-great-great-great-great (7 greats!) grandson, whose name was Enoch.

The New Testament tells us that Enoch was one of the great pre-flood preachers. He had a heart for his unbelieving family and spent much of his time warning them of their sin and pleading with them to turn back to God; reminding them of what God had told Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Not many people listened to Enoch. Sin and evil continued to grow and spread throughout the world, but Enoch remained faithful. He continued to believe God's promise of a Messiah, even though it looked like He might never come.

And because of this continued, persistent trust, Enoch pleased God. "He walked with God." Every single one of his ancestors would eventually die. The genealogy in Genesis 5 lists all of these pre-flood descendants of Adam, and the one thing they all had in common is that at the end of their verse it says: "And he died."

Enoch, though, did not die. When he was 365 years old—still a young man at that time—Enoch was taken up into heaven. Enoch was faithful, walking with God and trusting God's promise. He shows us that faith is having hope even when things look hopeless.

*Hebrews 11, verses 5 and 6: "**By faith Enoch** was taken up so that he*

should not see death, and he was not found because he had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Noah: It was just ten generations from Adam to Noah. But the world population had exploded at this point in world history. In fact, some estimate that if the growth rate was similar to today there would have been over four billion people alive at the time of the flood. And I’m sure the growth rate was much higher than it is today.

Billions of people on the earth; billions of people who were forgetting about old grandfather Adam and his make-believe stories about a garden, and a serpent, and a God. Genesis 6:5 says at the time of Noah: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

“EVERY intention.” “ONLY evil CONTINUALLY.” We can only imagine how sinful and wicked the world must have been.

Noah and his family were the *only* faithful people on the entire planet. THEY remembered God and remembered His promise. There was no end and there was no limit to the sinfulness of the men and women who had spread throughout the earth. “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” “Noah was a righteous man.” Noah had faith.

So God decided to wipe out the sin that had run rampant and start again with just Noah and his family. He would introduce different languages and shorten the average lifespan so people would have less of a chance to wander away and explore sin’s dangerous appeal. One day God told Noah his plan: that he would send a destructive flood of water—a torrent of rain from above, and a deluge of water from below.

Noah had most likely seen rain before. But Noah—and everybody else, too—had probably never seen a *flood* before. But God told him that there would be a flood of water that would not just be inconvenient; it wouldn’t just destroy a few fields of

crops—this *flood* of water would destroy every person on the planet.

If anyone else told Noah this, it'd be pretty far-fetched. It would have been pretty hard to believe. But this was God. God promised Noah that even though this flood would happen, He *would* remember the promise He gave to Adam and Eve. He *would* be faithful to bring an end to the evil that had been introduced into the world; He *would* make things right again; He *would* restore humanity back to the image and likeness of God that it once had.

God's warning and instructions might have seemed absurd, but Noah "did all that God commanded him." Noah had faith, even when things might have seemed far-fetched. And because he was trustingly obedient, Noah was righteous before God.

*Hebrews 11, verse 7: "**By faith Noah**, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith."*

Abraham: Noah and his family built the ark, obeyed God's instructions, and were saved from the flood of destruction. They settled in the mountain region of Ararat—probably near what is today Armenia or Turkey—and re-grew the world population.

People lived much shorter lives than they had before. Some generations after the flood, Noah's descendants got together and decided to disobey God by building a tower into heaven so they could reach the God their long-dead ancestors kept talking about. Noah was faithful—he was called a "preacher of righteousness"—but sin still gripped the hearts and minds of humanity.

The people called their tower to heaven the Tower of Babel, but God stopped their doomed-to-fail project and scattered them to different parts of the globe, each speaking different languages. Sin continued to spread, but God would not forget his promise.

There was still a family line intact. There was still a Messiah coming. And God knew it was time to give His people yet another reminder of this promise. This

time, God chose a man named Abram.

God called Abram to leave what was comfortable and familiar. He was to leave his country—the culture, climate, and surroundings he was used to. He was to leave his kindred—the people he knew and the family he loved. And he was to leave his father’s house—where he had worldly possessions and the hope of a large inheritance.

Abram was to leave all of that and go somewhere he had never seen before. He was called to walk by faith to a place he hadn’t seen; trusting the voice of a God who very few people believed in.

Abram obeyed because He trusted God. He knew that the things of this earth paled in comparison to what God had planned. He faithfully obeyed and confidently trusted, even when he couldn’t see what was about to happen.

*Hebrews 11, verses 8 thru 10: “**By faith Abraham** obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”*

Sarah: Abraham’s wife was Sarah. The two of them obeyed God’s call and received another reassuring promise from God that a Messiah *would* come to rescue the world and free them from their sin.

Abraham and Sarah would continue the family tree of this future, coming Savior. But the years went on, and Sarah kept getting older. The promise was still back there, somewhere, in the back of Sarah’s mind, but this godly woman of faith began to have doubts.

Continuing a family tree means having children. But Sarah and Abraham were still childless. Both were nearly 100 years old, very old and very much past the point of being able to have children... At least, that’s what Sarah thought.

It had been a couple of decades since God first promised to use one of

Abraham's descendents to bless the entire world. Three mysterious visitors knocked on Abraham's door—or, tent—one day, and the elderly couple were gracious hosts. They offered their guests water and shade to refresh them, and bread, milk, and meat to feed them.

As the three guests were eating under a tree they asked about Sarah, who was quietly listening from inside the tent. Abraham told them where she was, and suddenly a voice from heaven said: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."

Sarah overheard this divine voice, and she laughed to herself. She had long since given up hope of ever having children; God might have promised her husband something long ago, but it wasn't something that concerned her. Not anymore.

But God heard her laugh, and said: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Abraham might not have known at the time, but his three mysterious dinner guests were actually heavenly visitors. Two were angels, and one was God Himself. Yahweh stepped into his creation to make a promise to Adam and Eve and now he stepped in again to reassure this chosen family.

Sarah would soon have a son, whose name was Isaac. In Hebrew Isaac means: "laughter," and Sarah said: "Who would have said that I would nurse children? But I have borne a son."

Sarah's laugh of doubt had been turned to a laugh of joy.

Hebrews 11, verses 11 and 12: "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. Five stories of faith. Five faithful people who *trusted* God even when no one else was; *believed* in God even when things looked hopeless; and *hopefully waited* for God to keep His promise.

These five people had faith, and because of their faith God made them righteous. He rescued them from sin and brought them to a perfect, heavenly city.

The same God who these five believed in offers that same faith and that same righteousness to us, today, too.

Even when it looks hopeless, even when it seems like we're swimming upstream and all hope seems lost... God gives us faith. And he makes us righteous.

Amen.