

Message Fifteen: The Reward of Faithfulness

Hebrews 10:39-11:40 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 15

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

The fourth warning closed on a note of confidence: the author believed his readers would not shrink back, but would press forward in faith. That single word "faith" becomes the hinge on which the whole next chapter turns. What follows is often called the Faith Chapter, but it isn't a chapter about faith as an abstract virtue. It's a roll call of specific people who believed specific things God had told them about a specific future — and it exists exactly where it does in this letter for a reason.

I. Faith to the Preserving of the Soul

The chapter division obscures something the original readers would have caught immediately. "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" (Hebrews 10:38-39). That closing phrase — "the saving of the soul" — is not describing how a person first comes to Christ. The word behind "saving" here shows up elsewhere in the New Testament tied specifically to a still-future hope: believers are described as destined "for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9), called "to obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:14), sealed by the Spirit "who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession" (Ephesians 1:14). In every case, the word points forward — toward salvation, glory, and inheritance still ahead. The "saving of the soul" in Hebrews 10:39 is that same future-facing hope: a life fully realized in the coming age, held out to those who keep believing rather than shrinking back.

II. What Faith Actually Is

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. 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" (Hebrews 11:1-3).

This is less a formal definition of faith than a description of what faith accomplishes. Believing what God has said about the future gives substance to a hope that has no other foundation yet, and gives evidence for a reality no eye has seen. Notice, too, the word rendered "worlds" in verse three. It translates a Greek word elsewhere rendered "age" or "ages" throughout this letter — the same word behind "the world to come" (2:5), "the powers of the age to come" (6:5), and "the end of the

ages" (9:26). Read in that light, verse three is not making a claim about the physical composition of the universe. It's making the same claim this whole letter has been building toward: the ages — past and still to come — were framed by God's own word, and what faith perceives was never something visible to begin with. Everything in this chapter that follows is what that kind of faith looks like lived out.

III. Faith Before the Flood

"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" (Hebrews 11:4). "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death... for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:5-6). "By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

Three men, three different acts, one common thread: each believed something about the unseen — a right way to approach God, a life that pleases Him, a coming judgment no one else took seriously — and acted on it before there was any visible evidence to justify the act. Noah built a boat on dry land for a flood that hadn't come yet. That is precisely the shape of faith this letter has been describing.

IV. Abraham and the Search for a Better Country

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents... for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10). Notice what Abraham was actually looking for. He lived his entire life in the land God promised him, and yet lived there as a foreigner in a tent — because the object of his faith was never simply the plot of ground. It was a city with foundations, one only God could build.

The author then pauses to summarize the whole company of patriarchs: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland... they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:13-16). They died without receiving what was promised. That did not mean the promise had failed. It meant their sight was fixed further ahead than their own lifetime could reach.

V. Abraham's Final Test

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called,' concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense" (Hebrews 11:17-19). Every promise Abraham had been given ran through this one son. Asking for Isaac back looked, on the surface, like God contradicting His own word. Abraham's faith reasoned past the contradiction to a conclusion the text states plainly: God was able to raise the dead. That confidence didn't appear from nowhere at the altar. It was the same faith that had carried him out of his homeland years before, now tested at its furthest limit.

That same forward-looking confidence carried on through the next generation. Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau "concerning things to come" (Hebrews 11:20). Jacob, dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshiped, still looking ahead. Joseph, at the end of his own life, spoke of Israel's future departure from Egypt and gave instructions concerning his bones — arranging, before his death, for his body to eventually leave a land he knew his family would only leave generations later. None of these men needed to see the fulfillment with their own eyes. Believing what God had said was enough to shape how they lived and how they died.

VI. Moses and the Better Treasure

"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). Every earthly advantage a man could want was already in Moses's hand — a palace, a title, security. He walked away from all of it, and the text is explicit about why: "he looked to the reward." Faith didn't ask Moses to pretend Egypt's treasures were worthless. It asked him to weigh them honestly against something greater still ahead, and to choose accordingly. "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

VII. A Great Cloud, Briefly Told

The author picks up the pace as the list grows: the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the walls of Jericho falling, Rahab receiving the spies in peace. Then the names come even faster — "Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises... out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens" (Hebrews 11:32-34). And then the list turns, without warning, from triumph to suffering: "Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection... of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:35-38).

Notice that both halves of this list are held together under the same single word: faith. The ones who conquered kingdoms and the ones who were tortured for refusing release were not living out

two different kinds of belief. Some faith is vindicated in this life, visibly, publicly. Some faith is vindicated only in the age still to come. Both were commended. Neither is lesser.

VIII. Something Better for Us

The chapter closes with a statement that reframes everything just read: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us" (Hebrews 11:39-40). Every person named in this chapter died still waiting. Their faith was real, their testimony genuine, and yet the promise itself remains unfinished business — tied, remarkably, to us. Their completion and ours arrive together, at the same future point, not on separate schedules.

Applying "The Reward of Faithfulness"

Every person named in this chapter is proof that faith is not a passive feeling. It is belief specific enough, and strong enough, to shape what a person actually does — the sacrifice offered, the ark built, the homeland left behind, the treasure refused, the reproach chosen over comfort. None of it required seeing the outcome first. All of it required believing what God had already said.

You have been given exactly that same invitation: to live now on the strength of what has been promised for later, even though it remains, for now, unseen. The names in this chapter are not there to be admired from a distance. They are there so that you would recognize the same kind of faith available to you, and take hold of it with the same confidence they did.

Looking Ahead

Next, we move into Hebrews chapter twelve, where the author gathers this entire cloud of witnesses into a single image — a race to be run with endurance, with our eyes fixed on Jesus.