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Hebrews 11:1–3, ESV.

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Hebrews 11:23–30, ESV.

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

Old Testament faith.

Hebrews is unusual among the books of the New Testament. It has a very literate vocabulary, and it is written in an eloquent Greek. It makes very heavy use of Old Testament references. It is rather bipolar in nature: it both warns the faithful in very blunt terms and offers the warmest encouragement for the faithful. We have

no idea who wrote Hebrews. Even in the years immediately following it having been written, people did not know the name of the author. Many have suggested that Paul wrote it, and this argument was used to help get it included in the New Testament canon. But the vocabulary, language structures, and foci are extremely different from the letters that we do know he wrote. There are people who suggest that Barnabas wrote it. We read about him in the Book of Acts, and he encouraged other people in a way that is similar to the writing in the letter to the Hebrews. Others have suggested Priscilla; we read about her in Acts, as well; she was one of the earliest converts to the faith and was a sort of preacher. Priscilla instructed a man named Apollos, and some have suggested that Apollos wrote Hebrews because this was written about him in Acts: *He was an eloquent man, very knowledgeable in the Scriptures*; in 1st Corinthians he is described as someone who had a faithful following, strongly suggesting that he was a leading preacher. But in truth, we will probably never be able to assign an author to this letter.

We also do not know to whom the letter was written. It appears to have been addressed to a group of Christians somewhere who needed encouragement. We think that Hebrews was written before the year 90, because by that time it was being quoted as far away as Alexandria, Egypt. The letter describes Timothy, a mentee of Paul, as being active as a Christian leader, further suggesting a first

century date of authorship. In truth, although we call it a letter, it isn't even written like one. It does not begin with a greeting and has no signature. It could have been a sermon that was later packaged for wider distribution – in fact, it is quite likely that this is exactly what it is, as the first twelve chapters do read like an extended sermon, with one chapter, 13, added as a sort of closing, including a benediction at the very end.

The major theme of Hebrews is this: how to perfect our faith.

This letter makes heavy use of an encouragement tool that we sadly don't properly appreciate today. Many of us wonder how we can build our faith. In the first century, they still very much appreciated the stories of the Old Testament, the ancient Jewish Scriptures. It leans on the stories of Abraham, Moses, Aaron, the brother of Moses, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of the Old Covenant as a whole. Chapter 11 is particularly powerful in the way it uses Old Testament stories to remind all of us that faith is a very ancient thing, that some people have risked far more than we risk by believing in God, that some people have survived far more gruesome sufferings than most of us will ever face - and they still retained their faith. Moreover, it tells us that we must do what the ancient believers did, and that is to not look toward the material world for spiritual support. Consider the very first verse of Chapter 11: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the*

conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. This is perhaps the key, underlying principle to keep in mind when trying to build our faith: it's all about believing in things you cannot prove with your senses or with science.

We're told this in the fourth verse of Chapter 11: *⁴By 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.* Remember that Abel made an offering to God, and it was accepted, while his brother's offering was not favored by God, and so Cain killed Abel. Cain ended up banished by God to an unsettled area, some place "East of Eden", meaning that he would be a complete outsider to the people of God. So, Cain was punished, but Abel nonetheless was killed because of his faith in God.

Here is verse seven of Chapter 11: *⁷By 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.* Noah did something wild and crazy, based entirely on his faith in God: he built a gigantic boat when there was as yet no sign of a coming flood. But as a result, Noah was rewarded as the patriarch of all of

humanity. Most importantly, here is what the Book of Genesis says about the faith of Noah, after he built the ark: ²² *Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

Now consider verse eight of Chapter 11: ⁸ *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.* ⁹ *By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land.* This refers to a major, ancient story that begins in the Book of Genesis. He and his family, simply at the command of God, left their home and their lives. He went out into an unknown land. He lived as an alien there. He lived in a tent, like a transient. Abraham never settles down. He does not become a permanent resident in his new land. This tells us that believers are sojourners in this world. We don't become residents of the world of people. We do not buy into the corruption of our surrounding culture. We live like Abraham. Keep in mind that Abraham was raised by idol-worshipping parents. He was a descendent of Noah, and he was the father of the Chosen People, but all he ever owned was a cave that he bought to serve as his wife's grave, and as his grave. His wife, by the way, was Sarah, and in verses eleven and twelve of Hebrews 11, we read this: ¹¹ *By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.* ¹² *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. Sarah was childless and very old, and she actually laughed when God promised her a child. But this is what we are told in response to her laughter: ¹⁴*Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.*” Sarah is reminded of something that a person of faith must believe - that nothing is difficult for God. In Genesis, we are told the real gift behind Sarah being able to have a baby; God says this: ¹⁷*I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,* ¹⁸*and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.* We are reminded that faith is rewarded, but we should never expect that reward to be in material things in this world right now.

In verses 17 through 22, we hear the faith stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We learn that one of the key elements of faith is obedience to God’s commands, and not simply trust in God’s promises. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of this, from Genesis, Chapter 22: *God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”* ²*He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”* As we know, since Abraham’s faith had been

successfully tested, God did not allow his son Isaac to die. Genesis says this: *“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”* Remember that Old Testament fear of God means respect of and faithfulness to God.

Let’s consider now, our second passage for today:

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

This last verse, about Jericho, isn’t about Moses, of course, but it reminds us that as we have seen, the entire story of the founding of the land of Israel, of the birth and history of the Chosen People, is built step by step, over many, many generations on one thing: unwavering faith in God.

In sum, we see that Chapter 11 of Hebrews tells us that we cannot turn to the material world for purpose; we must turn to God. As Christians we are aliens in this world. Our world is the Kingdom of God. We can have faith that God is real,

and that God can do anything. We must be obedient to God if we truly have faith. Most of all, we should lean on the stories of the ancients.

But here is something very intriguing about Hebrews, Chapter 11: it relies very heavily, almost entirely, on the stories of biblical characters that we know today might never have existed. From Adam and Eve to Noah to Abraham to Moses, there is very little evidence that these are true, historical people. There is a lot of scientific, literary, and archeological evidence that a world-wide flood did not happen, that two million people did not live in the desert for forty years, and that the land of Canaan was not brutally attacked, and its pagan inhabitants were not totally slaughtered. So, is the material in Chapter 11 of Hebrews valid for us? Perhaps the original readers of Hebrews thought that these people and their stories were historically accurate. Here is what I think. These are faith stories. The fact that they are either possibly fictional or at a minimum somewhat enhanced from their truthful origins merely stresses the fact that we should not look for the real world, the historical world of humans to build our faith for us. These Old Testament stories teach us principles, not history. They give us something to hold up as guideposts that we can look toward when we feel our faith failing. In fact, the writers at the time of the Old Testament did not have the same notion we have of separating fact from fiction. They didn't have the deep compulsion that we have

of making sure that historical documents are correct, down to the tiniest details. The Bible itself, in the Old and New Testaments, is full of internal conflicts, indicating that it cannot be fully literally true. Those who believe that the Bible is completely factual have written many contorted briefs trying to argue away these inconsistencies. Even the Gospels conflict with each other on many points. I am not so sure at all that the readers of Hebrews necessarily focused on whether these stories were totally historical or not. I think that we need to relax and think like the ancients did. We need to see the truth in these faith stories, the truth that is far deeper than any historical perspective. Remember this incredible truth:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.² For by it the people of old received their commendation.³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Everything started with God, with things that are not seen. We must never forget that this is the basis of faith. Please pray with me.

God, let us lean on the stories in the Bible, stories that transcend literal truth. Let us never forget that our faith is not a thing of this world. Our faith is within us. Our faith comes to us from the Holy Spirit burning inside of our hearts and minds. Help us build our faith every day of our lives. Let growing our faith be our goal in life. Let us live by faith and for faith. Amen.