

12

SESSION TWELVE

Once Faithless, Now Faith-filled

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will explore how the writer of Hebrews defined faith and the trace examples of men and women who demonstrated faith throughout the pages of the Old Testament. While this list of faithful ones encourages, their faith is not what we should ultimately imitate. Above all, we should imitate the enduring faith that belongs to Christ Jesus.

SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 11–12:2

THE POINT

Jesus is the source and perfecter of our faith.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Martin Luther—a man always fearful of his place before God—once said, “If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.”¹ Luther was. Wracked by fear and guilt, he trembled at the idea of God’s judgment. But Luther had not yet discovered for himself in the Bible the very idea that turned the world upside down: justification by faith.

Could such a radical notion be true? Can we actually be totally saved from the wrath of God by ... belief? It was in the pages of Scripture that Luther came to the daring conclusion that the answer to that question is yes. Set loose to roam freely in the Word of God, he had rediscovered the gospel, helping to rescue it from the extra-biblical church traditions built on self-righteousness that had obscured it and confused it. He found the doctrine of “faith alone” all over the place, and it became like oxygen to his soul.

Luther said that the notion of justification by faith alone (in the Latin, *sola fide*)—today the hallmark doctrine of Protestant Christianity—is the article upon which the church stands or falls. It is the article of Christianity upon which our personal Christian life will stand or fall, also—that is, if we really understand what faith is, and what it isn’t.

- **How does the idea of justification by faith alone encourage you? Does it also concern you in any way? How?**

Option 2

As you begin today’s session, place students in groups of three to four. Instruct students to come up with a commercial to “sell” faith. Remind them that a good commercial should demonstrate what faith is, the benefits of faith, why it is different from all the other products out there, and what it costs to “buy” faith. Allow five minutes for students to come up with an idea, then allow each group one minute to present their commercial to the whole group.

- **Which commercial do you think best described faith? Why?**
- **How do you personally define faith?**

Throughout this session, students will learn what the true meaning of faith is, and that it cannot be bought by our works or any amount of possessions; our faith is a gift to us through Jesus Christ. He “bought” faith for us because we could do nothing to save ourselves.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus is the source and perfecter of our faith.

CHARACTERS

- **Author of Hebrews:** Unknown, though some possibilities might include Paul, Luke, Apollos, Priscilla, or Barnabas

PLOT

Faith is a popular term not just in the church and Christian life, but also within pop culture. Many movies, songs, and hit television shows discuss, and often redefine, what it means to have faith. The final session of this study focuses on the Book of Hebrews, through which we take a look at one of the most famous chapters throughout the New Testament—a chapter dedicated to unpacking what it means to have faith.

TIMELINE

THE HALL OF FAITH

Examples of living by faith

* Beginning Summer 2018

THE PLOT

AGAINST PAUL

Jews organized a conspiracy to kill Paul.

PAUL BEFORE EARTHLY KINGS

Paul testifies before earthly rulers.

DEFINING FAITH

Before we look at how faith should work itself out in our lives, we should probably first define faith itself. It's no good pushing forward in a study of faith if we don't know what faith actually is.

- **How would you define *faith*?** (p. 84, PSG)

So, what is faith? Some say faith is belief or trust. While both of these statements are true, they are lacking. Belief and trust are synonyms rather than a definition. Perhaps the best definition of faith is found right on the pages of Scripture:

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation. (Heb. 11:1-2)

According to the author of Hebrews, faith is “the reality of” something which currently cannot be seen. This is why Paul said the Old Testament patriarchs were justified by their faith in the promise—a promise that had not been seen (Rom. 4). The Old Testament saints hadn’t seen the object of their salvation (yet), but they trusted in God’s promise to one day provide it—and He did in Jesus Christ.

What about us then? Since Christ—what we hope for—has come, do we still need faith? Without a doubt! Our faith is not only in who Christ is and what He has done, but also in what He has promised He will do. Our salvation is already and not yet. We are saved from the judgment of sin, but we eagerly await the fullness of our salvation when we will finally be rid of sin and when Christ redeems creation. Just like the patriarchs’ faith, our faith looks forward with hope in what is still not seen.

Faith must have an object. The object of someone’s faith isn’t always God, of course. People have faith in their families, good grades, gifts and abilities, their religions, or themselves. People always have faith in something, whether they claim to believe in God or not.

Not only that, but if we tried to pay for God’s grace with a single penny of our religious efforts or with a storehouse full of good works, the “deal” would be off. The gospel announces all of His righteousness in exchange for all of our need. Period.

- **How does it affect you to know that even if you wanted to, you couldn’t buy righteousness through your own works?** (p. 84, PSG)

EXAMPLES OF FAITH

So it is faith alone, not our works, that justifies; however, this doesn't mean we don't work! We know that faith alone justifies, but we also know the faith that justifies is never alone. In other words, faith without works isn't really faith.

What is the place of works in the Christian life? Well, works aren't optional or random. The Bible says we were created for good works (Eph. 2:10), so Christians must work—it's part of our very purpose Christ-followers. Still, we have to see our good works in the revealing light of grace, together with the vital doctrine of "faith alone." We have to understand that our good works are not done to repay God for what He has done or for our own glory.

The best way to think about the place of good works in the Christian life is to view them as worship. The good works that honor God are the works done in delightful response to the finished work of Jesus Christ. It's not about repayment; it's about praise. This is how the author of Hebrews went on to illustrate faith:

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. 4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commanding him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. 6 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. 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. 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, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. 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. 13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (Heb. 11:3-13)

*For additional context, read through verse 40.

TIMELINE

SHIPWRECKED

Paul courageously faces the storm.

JOY IN PRISON

The gospel advances in difficult circumstances.

CHRIST IS PREEMINENT

Paul magnifies Christ in prison.

It is an epic passage full of wonder and worship. Men and women throughout biblical history authenticated their faith through their response to the promises of God. Some had visible earthly success while others experienced excruciating earthly failures. But, because of their faith, they all received the reward given to them by grace.

One thing to really appreciate about this “Hall of Faith” passage is how it doesn’t just include the obvious victories. It includes some apparent defeats, as well—difficulties, struggles, martyrdoms. It is not simply a catalog of strengths and heroic adventures. It reminds us of the very kinds of experiences that reveal the need for our faith.

We sometimes think that when we have faith in God, it will always lead to good things for us. Ultimately, our faith in God *does* lead to good things, but sometimes our faith will lead to agonizing defeat, crushing pain, loneliness, or torturous death. Sometimes the good that God brings through our faith doesn’t feel very good. But it is essential that we read that “all these were approved” (Heb. 11:39). Even amid such deep difficulties, their faith brought their approval from God. Eventually, their approval became ours since we are the benefactors of their faithfulness.

ENDURING IN FAITH

Just as grace through faith saves us from top to bottom, it is grace through faith that sustains us beginning to end. We do not start over in Christ by faith and then embark on a great “good works” self-improvement project. No, we “walk by faith” (2 Cor. 5:7). The author of Hebrews said that we actually run by faith.

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

What is it that can hold us back as we run and so easily ensnare (trap) us? The obvious answer is sin. When we take our eyes off of Jesus and fix our gaze on the world around us, we set ourselves up to fall (or even dive) into sin. Even sin that has been forgiven can be a crushing weight that will trip us up and hold us back.

Still, sin is not the only thing we need to be concerned about. Even good things can distract us from focusing on Jesus. The author of Hebrews says to focus our eyes on Him (12:2). Why did the author say this? I think it’s because it’s easy to pursue spiritual disciplines, religious efforts, and theological studies as the end game. We want to look more holy, be more knowledgeable, or seem more put together. This is not walking or running by faith at all; this is works-based self-righteousness.

No, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. As helpful as the examples of faith from are, the example of Jesus provided here is even more helpful. Jesus gave us the greatest example of enduring faith when He trusted in the Father during His journey to the cross. Jesus trusted in the Father throughout the greatest evil, the greatest difficulty, ever. He did trust with the joy that lay before Him—the joy of obeying the Father and glorifying Him.

- **How does Jesus keeping His faith all the way to the cross encourage your faith? (p. 86, PSG)**

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Faith (p. 86, PSG)

Biblical faith is the resting, or trusting, in Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16-21). More than being a mental agreement of historical facts, genuine faith begins with a recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel (1 John 4:13-16), followed by receiving Christ as Lord and Savior of one's life (John 1:10-13). Biblical faith is not blind faith because it rests on the historical life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

CHRIST CONNECTION

All the examples of faith in Scripture pale in comparison to the life of Jesus Christ “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). Because of His work, the faith and hope of all who have gone before us will be fulfilled when He returns. We have assurance of the reliability of God’s promises.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why is it important we remember “justification by faith alone” in times of defeat and hardship?** *The author of Hebrews mentioned people that experienced tremendous hardships “by faith” (11:35). In other words, having faith didn’t prevent them from suffering on this earth, nor does it mean that for us. What it does mean, is that we endure knowing that the promise God gave us will one day come to completion and the future glory we will one day see will far outweigh any struggles here on earth.*
- **Why is it important we remember “justification by faith alone” in times of success and comfort?** *Good times and success can certainly cause us to drop our guard by looking more to the comforts rather than toward Jesus with faith. Sure, we should certainly thank God for the success and comfort we have in this life, but we should not take more comfort in those successes than in Jesus. Faith serves us in both the good times and bad.*
- **What are some ways that we can keep our eyes on Jesus? What distractions do you need to set aside to help you focus more on Jesus and His gospel?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it encouraging to know Jesus is not just the author of our faith but the perfecter, as well?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY
God's Story of
Redemption,
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY
Where your story
meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES

HEAD

When it comes to good deeds, we must remember that every good work must be submitted to the glory of Jesus. Every spiritual discipline must be done as a means of deepening our friendship with Jesus. Every religious book read and every biblical doctrine studied must be aimed at increasing our affection for Jesus. It is only by focusing on Jesus that we will be able to endure in the Christian life and have a faith that lasts to the finish line.

- **While it is important to connect faith and works, why is it also important to distinguish between the two? Works don't justify or make us right before God, only faith in Christ can.**
- **Why would the idea of justification by faith alone, not by works, be the idea upon which the church stands or falls? Without the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the church would be left to people trying to earn their way to God, which is impossible.**

HEART

We do not work in order to pay God back because our debt has been paid in full the moment we place our faith in Christ. This is what it means to be justified. Trying to repay God with our works results in legalism and graceless religion. We place the emphasis on what we can do, not what God has done. We even work to make ourselves look good, so we might get some glory instead of God being glorified. While every other religious system in the world is founded on “get to work,” only Christianity is founded on “it is finished.”

- **How might thinking of good works as worship shape the way you live each day?**
Answers will vary.
- **How can we hold on to the necessity of good works as part of the Christian life without believing we have to repay God or having a self-righteous attitude? We have to remember to see works as the fruit of the Christian life, not the root. The root of good works is faith in Christ.**

HANDS

The life of faith will not be easy. In fact, it can be quite difficult. But one day, we will experience a joy beyond all comparison. How do we know this? We have an entire chapter of faithful examples who have shown us the way. Moreover, we have the faithful witness of Jesus Himself and His promise that one day all things will be made right. Jesus’ promise and these faithful examples encourage us to persevere in living by faith today.

- **Where does the endurance to run the race come from? It comes from looking to Jesus, which is faith. In other words, we endure not because we are clever or strong, but because we are weak and He is faithful.**
- **Who are some modern day examples of people living faithfully you can look up to? What qualities do they have that you would like to imitate in your own life? Answers will vary.**

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #16, which contains an informational poster on the Book of Hebrews.

SOURCE

1. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 315.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPSPR18Letters)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

STUDY PLAN

YEAR 1

Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)
God the Covenant-Maker
(Genesis 12-50)

Winter 2016

God the Redeemer
(Exodus)
God the Lawgiver
(Exodus, Leviticus,
Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016

God the Savior
(Numbers, Joshua)
God the Judge (Judges,
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

YEAR 2

Fall 2016

God the Revealer
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)
God the Pursuer (Major
and Minor Prophets,
1-2 Chronicles)

Winter 2017

God the Sustainer
(Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther,
Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller
(Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker
(Gospels)

YEAR 3

Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King
(Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2018

The Spirit Who
Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His
People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes
Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All
Things New (Epistles,
Revelation)