

Bible Studies for Life Series for December 3: Live out the gift of faith you have been given

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- Hebrews 11:1-2,5-7,32-38; 12:1-2

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At this time of the year, our thoughts turn to gift giving and receiving. Most have learned and taken to heart the truth of the old adage “it is better to give than receive.”

I remember when that sentiment became real in my life. During college, I had a part-time job that allowed me to work extra hours during the holiday rush. I was working right up until Christmas Eve, and I was able to get my paycheck—with all the extra hours—cashed before I left work and headed off to shop. For the first time in my life, I had enough money to buy just the right gift for everyone in my family. It really was “better” to give those gifts on Christmas morning than to receive.

Many in the church take this attitude when it comes to giving and receiving. Selfless service to the life and work of the church becomes the benchmark of the Christian experience. We often judge our spiritual health by how much of our time, talent and resources we offer to God. This is an admirable trait, but Christians must never forget that, while giving is important, there is much God gives to us.

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Over the next several weeks, these lessons drawn from several books in the New Testament deal with the life-changing gifts available from God: Faith that works; hope that lives; love that lasts; Jesus, God's greatest gift; and salvation for all.

Conversations about faith often include statements like, "If I could just believe more ..." or "I guess I just don't believe enough." These kinds of statements reflect the persistent notion that faith is something we "do" rather than something we possess.

At other times, we speak about faith as if it were a commodity of which we could obtain more. Do we "have faith" or "do faith"? Is faith activity or attitude? Is it something generated from within or from without? Perhaps better than any other, the writer of the book of Hebrews understood the nature of faith and how faith works.

Though most often listed along with the other general epistles of the New Testament, Hebrews reads more like a sermon than a letter. Several of the

typical characteristics of an ancient letter—address, salutation, thanksgiving—are absent from Hebrews. The closing verses of Hebrews do read more like a letter and offer intriguing glimpses into the life setting of the book, including the mention of Timothy (13:22-25).

The letter itself, however, provides insight into at least one early church leader provided encouragement and instruction to a congregation of Christians through the exposition and application of Scripture to a present situation.

The anonymous author of Hebrews knows the people addressed. These people seem to be second generation Christians of long standing (2:3; 5:11—6:3). They appear as people with possessions (10:34; 13:5, 16), imbued with a knowledge of the Hebrew Scripture. They are afraid of suffering and uncertain about the nature of faith. They had experienced persecution in the past—perhaps the Emperor Claudius’ expulsion of all Jews from Rome in AD 49—and the author plainly feels further persecution may cause some to fall away, but expresses a confidence the readers would be faithful to the end.

The writer of Hebrews finds it unthinkable that a believer would withdraw from the superior relationship with God offered through Jesus and discourages the reader from seeking any other path to God.

The focal passages follow a timely reminder about the past persecution (10:32-34) and an encouragement to persevere (10:35-39). The author previously cited the faithless Exodus generation (10:26-31), but confidently asserts about this generation of God’s people that: “... we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (10:39). This generation of God’s people acts from faith, just like the great heroes of faith from Israel’s history.

The justifiably famous “definition” of faith found in 11:1 asserts: “Now faith

is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Modern translations offer helpful insight into the meaning of “substance” (hupostasis) and “evidence” (elegchos). In legal documents, a pistis (faith) constituted a pledge or guarantee of payment or performance.

For the writer of Hebrews, faith includes assurance, confidence and conviction about things hoped for and certainty, proof, and verification about things unseen. This characteristic of assured conviction about expected yet unseen promises from God—this “faith”—allowed the great figures from biblical history to act faithfully.

The “roll call of the faithful” fills out the remainder of chapter 11. The listing of great figures from the past that demonstrate and illustrate a particular character trait was a common literary device in the ancient world. Here, however, the author follows the chronology of the Old Testament story and thus connects faith and faithfulness to salvation history and God’s plan for all of humanity.

What binds all these great individuals together is their understanding that their basis for security came not from their own talents or abilities, but rather, from an unseen God. Abraham and Sarah heard the call to travel to a place they did not know, and they went (11:8). Likewise, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and a whole host of others exercised assured confidence about expected but unseen promises.

The writer of Hebrews wants Christians to understand that they are a part of a magnificent history that is just now reaching its apex: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (11:39-40).

The writer concludes the discussion of faith by comparing the Christian life to a race that requires endurance. In such a race, any extraneous weight

hinders and drags down. The author encourages Christians to get rid of anything that distracts from focus on “Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (12:2).

Here is the essence of faith as gift. It is only through Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s purpose that we in turn can exercise faith. Jesus, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ... Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:2-3). Jesus by his faithfulness makes possible our faith—our entrance into the race. Jesus, by his victory gives us faith—our assured confidence to run the race to the finish line.

Discussion questions

- If faith is a gift, what is required from us as Christians? Do we rest in faith? Exercise faith?
- Twenty-first century western Christians may have much in common with the original audience of Hebrews. In what ways might we become lazy, sluggish, fearful and uncertain about our faith?
- What kind of weights and hindrances do Christians need to be aware of and discard as they run the race?

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