

Background to Hebrews

Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews? No-one knows. There are suggestions it could have been Paul's companions Apollos or Barnabus, or maybe Aquila or his wife Priscilla. Whoever wrote the letter, he or she was knowledgeable of the contents of the Old Testament and was proficient in Greek being authorised for ministry by the early church leaders. My wife Mel's opinion is that the author was Priscilla. Being an English teacher, she thinks it has to have been written by a woman because it is so well written! All these people were associates of the Apostle Paul in bringing Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. In the second chapter of the book [Hebrews 2:3-4] the author writes:

³ ... salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The author of Hebrews did not meet Jesus but knew those who had heard him speak about God's salvation. God confirmed this by signs, wonders and various miracles in the lives and actions of Jesus and the apostles who were equipped for the task by the Holy Spirit.

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written for Jews who had suffered for their faith in Jesus. Look at ***Hebrews 10:³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.***

The first ten chapters of this book teach that Jesus Christ is supreme, greater than angels and prophets, and even Moses. Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises to the old people of faith and. Jesus established a new covenant, where he became the sacrifice for sin and overcame death for our salvation. God is faithful, and the writer of Hebrews calls on us to be faithful to Him.

What is Faith?

So, we come to our passage for today.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

I remember asking my parents "What was it like in the olden days?", when they were probably in their early thirties, and I considered them ancient.

Most of us are old enough to remember the telephone boxes on street corners, when the comic character Detective Dick Tracy wore a fantastical two-way radio wristwatch, an unbelievable gadget to a young boy in the 1950s.

Never did I think that one day I would carry around in my pocket a mobile phone which has a camera, calculator, torch, clock, diary, radio, TV, maps, money, GPS – I'm sure you can think of many more things that the mobile phone has replaced. I remember looking at the ads for Mars Bars in the American produced comic books, but they weren't available in Australia. I had no

confidence or assurance that I would ever actually taste one – aah, but I lacked faith. Eventually they did arrive on Australian shores in 1954!

Christian faith is not about blind optimism or wishful thinking, but rather a deep trust in God and His promises, even when those promises are not yet visible or fully understood – we find this in Hebrews 11:1's definition of faith. Society may change, our gadgets may change, but faith does not change over time. Kipling wrote in his recessional "*faith of our fathers known of old*". The phrase repeated on ANZAC Day, "Lest we forget" is from Recessional – the original words being changed to be politically correct these days, where the word faith is dropped out.

The New Living Translation states Hebrews 11:1 this way: ***Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.*** It's a great definition.

The writer tells us that ² ***This [faith] is what the ancients were commended for.*** The writer reflects back to the people from the different ages of history like when King David and the Old Testament heroes lived – the ancient people who believed in one God and worshipped Him. Isaiah records 45:5 God saying: ***I am the Lord and there is no other, apart from me there is no God.*** The people of faith OT times recognised their creator God, and in doing so their faith increased.

The prophet Isaiah says in ***42:5-6 This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.***

Faith is accepting the hand of God in our lives, knowing that He alone is the creator of the universe, an all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful God, who loves us and cares for us, who leads us in righteousness – for His name's sake – as Psalm 23 reminds us, and Isaiah 46:4 urges me on to keep walking in faith: ***Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.***

Our writer tells us in Hebrews 11 ³ ***By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.***

Paul, in Romans 1 tells us God reveals himself to all of us, and that no one has excuse for not believing in Him. ²⁰ ***For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.***

The Prophet Isaiah emphasises this and throws questions out to his listeners, and to us in ***Isaiah 40: Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood ... ? ...*** ²⁵ ***"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.*** ²⁶ ***Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these [things you can see in our world and beyond]?***

"These questions make it obvious that people should know the truth about their supreme God. They have no excuse, nor do we!"¹

¹ Encounter With God: 14/7/2025

We express faith by recognising God as Lord over all, despite worldly pressures to follow other powers that disregard Him. As Psalm 2 advises: **10 Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. 11 Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.**

The Journey of Faith

Hebrews 11:6 says ***6 without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Believe God exists and seek him.***

In Hebrews 11 we have an honour roll of those who in faith believed God and served him. Abel, Enoch and Noah, really ancient people who lived by faith, are mentioned. That honour roll has continued to grow over another 2 thousand years, and we can recall many who have stood up for their faith, many enduring hardship and suffering, yet their faith shone through. Chapter 12 describes them as a '**great cloud of witnesses**' encouraging us to run in the race of life to achieve the rewards of faithfulness to God.

We read in verse 7: ***7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.***

We find here that being right with God is obtained through faith. Noah was warned about things he had never seen, and by faith did what was right in the eyes of God. Remember what God tells us in verse 1-2? ***Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients [like Noah] were commended for.***

Skipping forward to the next chapter - Hebrews 12, we read another description of these '**ancients**', they are *in the grandstands urging us*, for **12:1 ... we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses**, and the writer encourages us in the following verses at the beginning of Hebrews 12 – turn with me as we examine these ancients of faith to consider our journey of faith:

We are to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. We are to acknowledge the sin in our lives as the first step in coming to faith, accepting our need of a Saviour.

1. We are to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, We are to make a sustained effort and be determined in living a life of faith through challenges and difficulties in the Christian walk. *Sitting in the pew in church doesn't make a person a Christian any more than being in a garage turns a person into a car.* [Begg]
2. We are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews 11 gives examples of people of faith, with the ultimate purpose of focussing on Jesus who taught us about true faith by word and deed.
3. We are to base our faith on Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12: ***2 For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.***

The Witness of Faith

So who are included in this '**great cloud of witnesses**'? Well, there's a list of ancients in Hebrews 11, and throughout the Scriptures old and new we find great examples of those who have walked before us, and by their examples cheer us on in our race of faith. And I believe this refers to people who have lived by faith over the past 2000 years as well as the '**ancients**' and those of NT times.

I have been re-reading the biography of C.T.Studd. I was repairing the dust cover of my wife's Church prize and decided to read it again. C.T. Studd's faith journey is truly inspiring. Born into a wealthy English family in 1860, Studd was a talented cricketer who played for England against Australia. Along with six other University students, nicknamed the Cambridge Seven, Studd felt a strong call to missions. The news of the departure of one of England's best all round cricketers at the time came as a shock to the public. Leaving behind fame and fortune to pursue mission work in an unknown land didn't make any sense. But, Studd was determined. Before his departure, he led a series of 'revival meetings' to universities, impacting many. Then, in the February of 1885, less than three years after he had won the Ashes Series [for England], C.T. Studd left for China. When [Charles] Studd was in China, his father, Edward Studd, died [and] left behind 29 000 pounds [over 3 million pound in today's money] for Studd as his inheritance. Studd gave away all his inheritance. He had kept quite a sum for a wedding present to his wife, and she was insulted, saying,

After serving in China for nine years and with deteriorating health, C.T. Studd returned home to England. But it wasn't long before he felt a calling to India. He served there between 1900 and 1906. He visited [the African country of] Sudan in 1910, he set his heart to Belgian Congo (now in modern day Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1913. Here, he spent the rest of his life, serving God wholeheartedly until his death in 1931.² He started a mission called Heart of Africa, which is now WEC International with many hundreds of workers around the world. He was a man of faith which was marked by radical generosity, a passion for evangelism, and trust in God's provision. His motto was, "*If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him*". I consider Studd to be among those in the cloud of witnesses who inspire me to continue in my faith's journey.

Back to our reading – another ancient – a giant of faith appears in verse 8. Abraham.

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

Abraham trusted God's call on his life. He was originally from Ur, a city in what is now Iraq. God called him to leave his homeland and idolatrous family life, promising to make him the father of a great nation. God promised Abraham numerous descendants and the land of Canaan, and in return, Abraham was to follow God's commands and worship Him alone. ***¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*** ***¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.*** ***¹² And so from this one man, and he as***

² <https://regenerationz.org/the-untold-story-of-c-t-studd-the-cricketer-turned-missionary/>

good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Abraham exemplifies faith and obedience by trusting in God's promises despite apparent impossibilities. Remember: **11:1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.**

We read in verse 13ff that **¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.** Do you consider yourself a '**foreigner and stranger**' on earth? We are blessed with the knowledge that Jesus has lived and died, rising again for our salvation and that he will return to take his people to be with him. Do you believe that? Do you have that faith? Abraham and these ancient people believed – but the promise did not come true in their lifetime – however they saw that the promises of God were true – they had the hope and assurance of the faithfulness of God. They were looking for the fulfilment of the promises of God – as we are encouraged to do, not looking behind at the past but looking forward to the fulfilment of God's promise of eternal life and our eternal home. Look at v14: **¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.**

Abraham stepped out in faith, leaving the security of his homeland and walked in faith. He was not a perfect man, but a faithful man of God, as were the others mentioned in this Honour Roll of Faith, who lived through struggles and trials, but rather than giving up in their walk with God, we read in verse **¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.**

If you've ever read Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, who suffered for his faith and languished in prison, you'll remember that a man called Christian leaves the "City of Destruction" (representing the world and its sinful nature) to seek the Celestial City. He faces numerous trials, temptations, and dangers along the way, demonstrating the challenges of the Christian walk of faith.

To walk in faith is to be content to walk into the unknown with He who has revealed Himself to us, for our God is faithful and calls us to join with the cloud of witnesses in testifying to his call on our lives to trust in his promises and walk into eternity with him.

C. T. Studd said, "*Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last.*" I pray this is what you believe, that you can say that, and that you step out of this church today trusting God to lead you in His way everlasting, walking through life in faith until Jesus calls you into his arms.

*"Certainly the foolishness of God is wiser than men. In two years, the heart of Africa had been pioneered by a grandfather and a physical wreck, while the home end of the Mission had been established by an invalid from her couch. Such was the foundation of the H.A.M. Exactly "according to plan," God's plan, which only requires one thing for its fulfilment, not education, nor talents, nor youth, nor strength, but faith. By faith Abraham ... by faith Moses ... by faith C.T.Studd ..."*³ So can you say, by faith I will put my hands into the living God, trusting in His Son Jesus Christ, and walk with Him into eternity.

³ C T Studd. Norman Grubb. Page 162