

Hope for another world, faith for today: Readings in Hebrews 11-12

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Faith is the defining feature of the Christian and the Christian life. We are people who believe. We live lives of trust in God. These readings look closely at what it means to have faith.

Scripture taken from The Holy Bible: NIV 2011

Day	Readings	Reference	Reflection/Question	Prayer
1	Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.	Hebrews 11:1-2	<p>There are all kinds of things that I hope for: a thinner body, a cleaner house, success for my children. I hope for these things, but honestly, my hopes are often little more than optimistic wishes. They have no power. I haven't invested in a wardrobe of size 8 clothes because as much as I'd like to lose weight, I'm not confident that it's going to happen. Mere hope alone is not enough to make me take risks and go out on a limb. For hope to make a difference, I need to couple it with faith.</p> <p>In Hebrews, faith and hope are tightly linked. Faith is confidence in what we hope for. The assurance of things unseen. It's faith that makes us act on what we hope for. Faith gives power to our dreams.</p> <p>As a Christian, what are the things that you have to hope for? How confident are you that these things will actually happen?</p>	<p>Father God, strengthen our confidence that you will do the things that you've promised you'll do, so that we will be able to live fearlessly for Jesus.</p> <p>Amen</p>
2	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.	Hebrews 11:3	<p>God has promised us many things. We cannot yet see them all – some remain invisible to us – but faith is the conviction that we will, one day, see all that God has spoken of. Today we read that making visible things from his invisible word is what God has done from the beginning. At creation he spoke and the earth appeared. Believing in the power of God's word at creation strengthens us to trust that God will make visible his other promises as well.</p> <p>Do you believe that God made the world by his word? Do you believe that he will make a new world as well?</p>	<p>Father God, you spoke and the world appeared. Help us trust in the power of your word. Give us faith that we will soon see all that you have promised us.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

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3	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.	Hebrews 11:7	<p>Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is “the assurance of things unseen.” God warned Noah about the coming flood and before he saw the clouds in the sky, Noah took the costly step of building the ark. He was convinced that God’s word was right – even though he had no physical evidence that rain was coming – and he acted on that conviction. This is the kind of faith that God reckons as righteousness.</p> <p>What warnings has God given to us? How can we act on these warnings?</p>	<p>Loving Father, help us to take seriously your warnings of judgement. Grant us the patience and faith that Noah had, enduring the scoffings of the unbelieving world and trusting unswervingly in your word for salvation.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
4	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. 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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.	Hebrews 11:8-10	<p>Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is “confidence in what we hope for.” Abraham was promised a land. He had his hopes set on that land, but unlike me with my weak hopes, Abraham coupled his hope with faith. It was this hope and faith together that led to Abraham’s remarkable obedience – setting off into the unknown, living as a foreigner, dwelling only in tents, looking for that city that God would build for him.</p> <p>What costly acts of obedience have you seen among your Christian friends? How did faith and hope make that obedience possible?</p>	<p>Thank you, Father, for Abraham and his example of faith. Help us to live like him, confident in your promises and active in obedience to you.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

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5	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. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.	Hebrews 11:13-16	<p>From the start, the people of God have had their eyes fixed forward. The saints of old were always looking ahead, straining to see beyond the horizon, longing for even a glimpse of that world to come, the promised land, the heavenly city that God has prepared. For the ancients and for us, faith is the desire for that better country. We're convinced it's coming and we long to be there. Often we feel like foreigners here on earth. We are homesick, but for a home we've not yet known.</p> <p>Spend some time thinking about the heavenly city that's awaiting us. What do you know about it from other bible passages?</p>	<p>Thank you, Father, for preparing a city for us. Please fit us for it and speed the day when we and all your saints will be there, worshipping our Lord Jesus.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
6	By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.	Hebrews 11:17-19	<p>It's hard to imagine Abraham's thought process when God asked him to sacrifice his son, but these verses give us some clue. Abraham's logic would have run something like this: <i>Isaac is the son through whom my descendants will come and through whom God's promises will be fulfilled. I know this. God has said it. Therefore, if God wants me to sacrifice Isaac, he must be planning to raise him to life again.</i></p> <p>Now, of course we know that God never intended for Abraham to sacrifice his own son (God would not put any human through that pain - only himself!); it was a test. But these verses make it clear to us that Abraham's passing this test was entirely due to his faith. He was absolutely convinced that God's promise would stand and so he could step out in the most radical obedience.</p>	<p>Dear Father, teach us to so embrace your promises that we will live wholeheartedly for you, no matter what the challenge.</p> <p>Amen</p>

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7	By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.	Hebrews 11:22	<p>Last words tend to be important words. As he was dying, Joseph instructed the people of Israel that his bones must be carried out of Egypt when God brought his people into the promised land.</p> <p>Why might this have been so important to Joseph? How are Joseph's last words evidence of his faith?</p>	<p>Dear Father, grant that our lives and our deaths will testify to our hope in you and our certainty that you will fulfil your promises to us in Jesus Christ.</p> <p>Amen.</p>
8	By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.	Hebrews 11:24-27	<p>Moses makes a pretty big call here – to choose ill-treatment with the people of God over the treasures of life in Egypt. I wonder how many of us would have made the same decision. The answer is not guilt or even effort, but growing our conviction that God will deliver on his promises. Our reward will be so much greater than all of the treasures of Egypt and all the pleasures of this world.</p> <p>Would you have made the same decision as Moses? What is stopping you from giving up all the “treasures of Egypt” for the sake of Christ?</p>	<p>Dear Lord, convict us of the great rewards of your kingdom so that it can be said of us that we consider the reproach of Christ greater than all the treasures of Egypt. Make us into a people who would choose to endure ill treatment for your sake over the passing pleasures of sin.</p> <p>Amen</p>

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9	By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.	Hebrews 11:31	<p>When the Israelite spies came to Rahab's house, she said to them, "I know that the Lord has given you this land... Please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family." (Josh 2:8-9)</p> <p>How were Rahab's words a testimony to her faith? How did they demonstrate her 'assurance of things hoped for or conviction in things unseen?' How did God respond to her?</p>	<p>Merciful Lord, thank you for Rahab's faith and her courage in choosing your side over her own people's. Please strengthen the many people in the world today who are making the same choice as she did. Assure them of the things they cannot see and let them plant their hope firmly in the welcome that you promise to all who come to you.</p> <p>Amen</p>
10	And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.	Hebrews 11:32-34	<p>The Bible is full of stories of people who held fast to their convictions. Of people who acted in faith. These verses document great acts of faith from the Old Testament.</p> <p>Read through the list and see if you can pick some of the incidents that the writer is alluding to. Select one or two of them and think through the story, asking yourself how it is a demonstration of faith - "confidence in what we hope for, assurance of things unseen."</p>	<p>Dear Father, thank you for these saints who have run the race before us and who teach us what it means to trust in you.</p> <p>Amen.</p>

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11	There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.	Hebrews 11:35b-38	<p>In the centuries since these verses were written, God’s people have continued to suffer much persecution: physical, psychological, social, and economic. It is the ‘hope of a better resurrection’ that gives us strength to stand firm and face whatever is thrown at us. For those convinced that a new world awaits, extraordinary feats of endurance and valour are possible.</p> <p>Spend a moment considering Christians around the world who face jeers and flogging, chains and imprisonment. What is your prayer for them?</p>	<p>Dear Father, be near us when we are mocked, shunned or ill treated because of our faith in you. Strengthen us with the hope of eternal life so that we have the courage to stand firm.</p> <p>Amen</p>
12	These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.	Hebrews 11:39-40	<p>Despite their faith, the saints of old died without seeing the fulfilment of God’s promises. They only glimpsed it from afar. Would they have been disappointed at the end of their lives? Perhaps yes, but ultimately, no. God’s plan was that they, along with us, would see all things come together in Jesus. Jesus is the one who makes us all perfect, and in him all of the saints – from Abel to us – will see what we long to see, and will arrive at that great city where all our hopes lie.</p>	<p>Dear Father, thank you that in Jesus we have communion with the saints through the ages. Thank you for their patient enduring hope and for our great privilege in seeing clearly that which was a mere shadow to them.</p> <p>Amen</p>

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13	Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.	Hebrews 12:1	<p>One of the beautiful things about being a Christian is the connection that we have with the saints who have gone before us. I love that I can sing the songs of Newton and Wesley from the 18th century, Forgaill from the 8th, and King David, Moses and Miriam from millennia before that. The faithful who have gone before us are a great crowd – a ‘cloud’ – so many more numerous than our opponents. Their hope was the same as ours, their faithfulness inspires us and their testimony is that it was worth it! So let us run with perseverance!</p> <p>What holds us back as we run this race? What can you do about it?</p>	<p>Dear Father, help us to throw off sin and break free of everything that hinders us, that we might run the race of faith.</p> <p>Amen</p>
14	And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.	Hebrews 12:1-3	<p>Jesus is described as the ‘pioneer’ and ‘perfecter’ of faith. As pioneer he cleared the way for others to follow, he opened up the path to heaven. As perfecter he makes sure we complete the journey, purifying us from sin and making us holy. He has done everything necessary so that we can complete the race. And he’s the greatest model for us to follow.</p> <p>What was the hope that Jesus was certain of? How can you fix your eyes on Jesus, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart?</p>	<p>Lord Jesus, as we run the race of faith, let us fix our eyes on you so that we will not grow weary and lose heart.</p> <p>Amen</p>