

Faith and faithfulness

7 August 2022

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ...

Feeling and trusting in what we can't always see ... like the wind, the water in a swimming pool that holds us up, Mum and Dad who go away but then come back again. Trust like that is called faith.

And as followers of Jesus, we put our faith and trust in Jesus even though we can't see him with our eyes.

BIBLE READING

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. ...

Hear the word of the Lord,

you rulers of Sodom;

listen to the instruction of our God,

you people of Gomorrah!

'The multitude of your sacrifices –

what are they to me?' says the Lord.

'I have more than enough of burnt offerings,

of rams and the fat of fattened animals;

I have no pleasure

in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to appear before me,

who has asked this of you,

this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings!

Your incense is detestable to me.

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations –

I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals

I hate with all my being.

They have become a burden to me;

I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands in prayer,

I hide my eyes from you;

even when you offer many prayers,

I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

Wash and make yourselves clean.

Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.

Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

'Come now, let us settle the matter,'
says the Lord.

'Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.

If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the good things of the land;
but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.'

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[Hebrews 1:1-3, 11:1-3, 8-16](#)

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. ...

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.

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. ...

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. 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. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as

numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

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.

MESSAGE Faith and faithfulness

When we think of a **hall of fame** ... we often think of sports stars ...

... like swimmer Emma McKeon who would certainly



qualify for an Australian swimming hall of fame after

winning lots more gold medals at the Commonwealth Games.

But how about the athletes who don't win gold medals but who show up anyway to represent their country and their community and who often end up a lap behind the other athletes? I reckon all the para swimmers probably deserve to be in the hall of fame as well – just for having the courage and determination to be there and have a go.



Our reading from the book of Hebrews this morning includes the opening part of the so-called **hall of faith** – which lists famous and not so famous people from Israel's past who share one thing in common – their faith in God.

This morning we'll hear a little about Abraham and Sarah, undoubtedly heroes of faith, but there are others on the list who are commended for their faith but who were mocked or flogged, who were persecuted and who lived largely as nobodies.

Yet they are still worthy members of the hall of faith just as much as Abraham and Sarah. And even for these two luminaries – the patriarch and matriarch of Israel – even their lives were not all filled with trust and faith-filled deeds. We'll come back

to these two later.



But first, I wonder who are **your** heroes of faith? Turn to your neighbour and just for a couple of minutes share about one person who for you is a hero of faith and why they are a hero of faith.

At the start of Hebrews chapter 11 we are told that faith is **confidence** in what we hope for and **assurance** of what we do not see. The word translated confidence here is *hupostasis* which is usually translated as essence or image –

so in the opening verses of the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as the *hupostasis* of God – the essence or image of God.

So faith is the **essence** of things hoped for, our core beliefs that we build our life around. They include God's **character** and God's **promises** that become so real in our lives it's as if they were already fully present. It's not a perfect comparison, but it's a little like an athlete visualising winning their race in their mind and imagining what that looks and feels like.

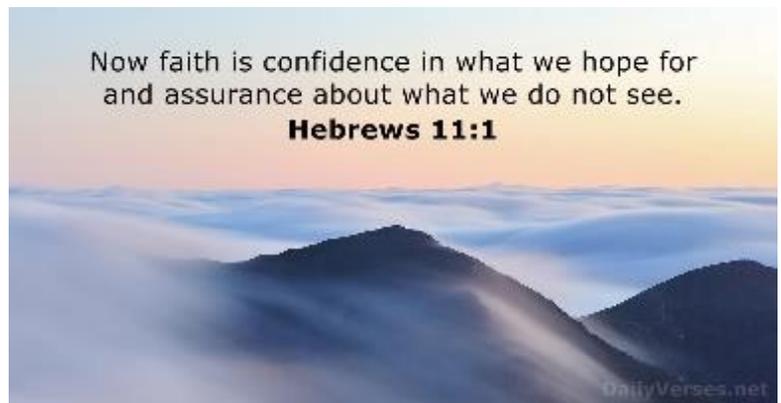
Faith involves living our life as if all of God's promises are already fully present – where we know God intimately, where we stand before God confident and forgiven, where we are named and loved by God, where we enjoy God's presence forever. This is the sort of faith that Hebrews encourages us to have.

But faith doesn't always feel so assured. Life can be messy and difficult, so faith is also having the courage to trust God in the absence of certainty.

It's a bit of a jolt, then, to turn from Hebrews to the opening chapter of the book of Isaiah, which sketches what a life of

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for
and assurance about what we do not see.

Hebrews 11:1



"Faith isn't a feeling.
It's a choice to trust
God even when the
road ahead seems
uncertain."

DaveWillis.org

living faithfully might – or might not – look like in practice.

You people of Israel – you folks who consider yourselves **blessed** and **chosen** and **loved** by God – you are like the inhabitants of **Sodom** and **Gomorrah** to me, cities of infamy and shame that God destroyed back in the time of Abraham.

You are indeed blessed and chosen and loved – but you're not reflecting that in how you live warns Isaiah.

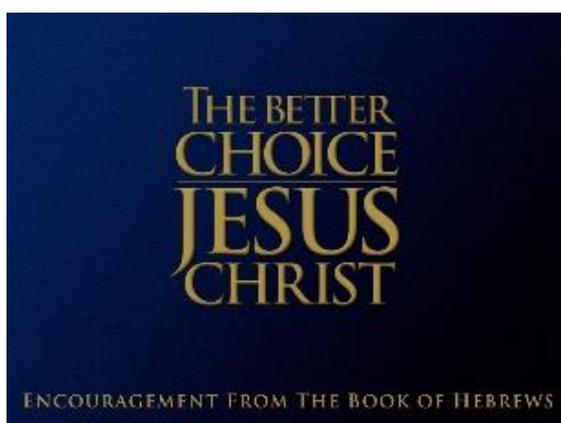
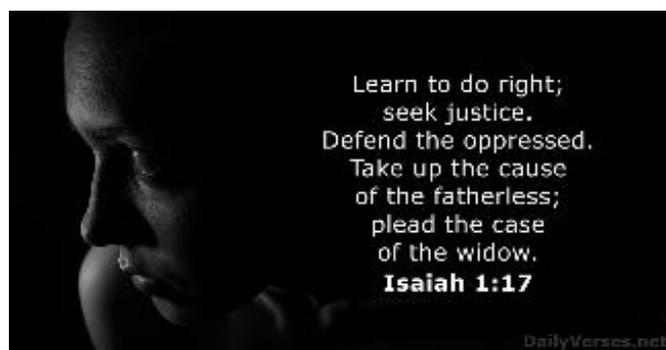
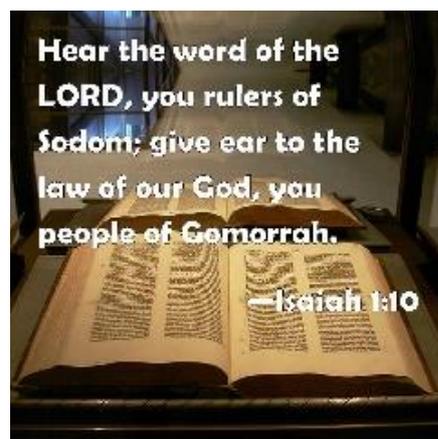
Your sins are plain to see – they're like bright red or crimson in God's sight. But there is still hope and the offer of grace – you can be washed clean as snow or wool – and enjoy the blessing of living in the land – if you will repent and turn your life and priorities around.

For Isaiah, living faithfully involves doing what is **right**, seeking **justice** and advocating for the **poor** – including widows and the oppressed.

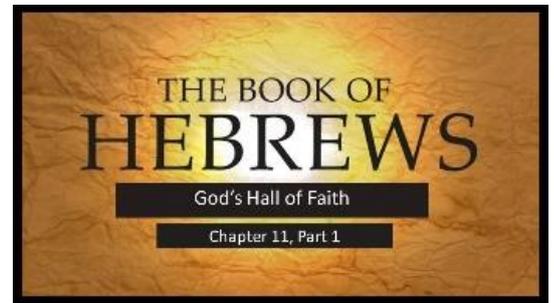
In Isaiah – as in other prophets including Amos that we've heard from recently – the active pursuit of

justice and doing right seems to matter much more to God than many sacrifices or fancy worship. Faith has to be lived out in the world with all its uncertainties and problems.

Coming back to the book of Hebrews, this often neglected book presents a different picture of Jesus than we are used to. The book is written to Jewish Christians and draws on **Jewish symbols of faith** – like the Temple and the sacrificial system. For the first ten chapters we hear how Jesus is a better High Priest than Aaron, who offers a better once-for-all sacrifice through his death on the cross – making Jesus the mediator of a new and better covenant with God, better than the covenant made with Moses. So there is no more need of animal sacrifices. Our sins have been dealt with once and for all through Jesus who offers us a different and better way of relating to God.



... which brings us to the famous 'hall of faith' chapter where the author brings forward a who's who of famous people from the OT to show the importance of faith in the life of Christian discipleship.



As this book is written to **Jewish** Christians it focuses on people and stories well known to Jews through their Scripture ... people like the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and matriarch Sarah, along with Moses, several of the Judges, David and Samuel.



This week our reading focuses on Abraham and Sarah ... heroes of Jewish faith through whom God would eventually build the nation of Israel ... and who are nearly always depicted as old people

with silver hair ... because the Bible tells us nothing of their younger years.

The book of Hebrews presents us with a fairly two dimensional view of their faith. Abraham responds to God's call and sets off not knowing where he is going. Abraham trusts God for children even though he is old and Sarah is beyond child bearing age.

The book of Genesis fills in some of the gaps in the story and shows that faithful Abraham and Sarah are deeply flawed human beings who exercise their faith as best they can ... and who sometimes show amazing trust in God and who sometimes take matters into their own hands and stuff things up.

Twice Abraham tries to pass off Sarah as his sister rather than his wife. He later doubts God's promises. When Sarah hears that she will have a child in her old age she laughs out loud and then denies that she laughed.

But through the difficulties and struggles, through the uncertainty of not really knowing what was to come or where they were going, living on the edge of faith, Abraham and Sarah continue to **trust** in God



- and are sustained by their faith and hope in God's promises.

That's what faith often looks like in practice. Persevering, pushing on despite the lack of certainty, continuing to trust in the goodness of God.

The argument in Hebrews is that each person of faith who is listed - the famous ones and the nobodies - each one trusted in the promises of God despite not living to see these promises fulfilled in their lifetime. Each person of faith lived in the light of the future, looking for the heavenly country, the heavenly city - where God's promises and purposes will be fully realised ... but living in the now as though these promises are already here.

And so we pray in the Lord's Prayer that **God's kingdom** would come in our midst and that **God's will** would be done here on earth ... despite all the doom and gloom that would suggest otherwise ... the wars and unrest that we see in Ukraine, Sri Lanka and elsewhere



... the struggles of family and neighbours to pay the rent or the mortgage ... the ongoing spread of covid infections ... the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

The way of faith looks at all of this and says I will continue to trust in God and in God's promises and continue to do my small part in making the world a place where justice and peace, hope and love and joy are all experienced.

Faith is not knowing how to get there but continuing to walk in God's ways.