

No Turning Back

Faith that Finishes: On the Meaning of Faith in Hebrews 11.

"**The just shall live by faith**" (Romans 1:17). Thus Martin Luther understood the Bible's teaching about how people can overcome their sin and become right with God. Justification as we understand it does not come to us by any merit that we earn or possess, but rather "**through faith in Christ Jesus**" (Galatians 2:16). Salvation comes to us *by faith . . . by faith and by faith*.

Therefore when reading Hebrews 11, the greatest chapter on faith in the Bible, we see the recurrent phrase "**by faith**" (it occurs at least twenty times in the chapter and its context) and tend to assign the justification meaning of the Apostle Paul to it. We assume that "**by faith**" the Preacher (that is who we shall call the author of Hebrews) has in mind how Enoch, Abel, Moses, Abraham, Sarah and others were declared right with God. That however, may not be the meaning of the phrase.

As regarding the controversial sense of the word "**faith**" in the Old Testament, "most scholars think the meaning is 'faithfulness' rather than 'faith' (though as faithfulness arises only out of a right attitude to God, faith in our sense is presupposed)."[1] In the words of William Romaine (1714-1795), "Faith signifies the believing the truth of the Word of God; it relates to some word spoken or to some promise made by Him, and it expresses the belief which a person who hears it has of its being true; he assents to it, relies upon it, and *acts accordingly*: this is faith." [2]

In the context of Hebrews, the phrase "**by faith**" refers more to the manner in which Old Testament saints acted and persevered in their commitment to God than to the means by which salvation/justification originally came to them. Though some would interpret the phrase "**faith**" as a dative of means, "**by faith**" might also convey an adverbial meaning of manner.[3] In other words, righteous ones "shall faithfully live," an isn't this what the quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 says? "**My righteous one**" says the Lord, "**shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My** [the Lord's] **soul has no pleasure in him**" (Hebrews 10:38).

This sense of faith--that of living faithfully--accords well with the Old Testament saints the Preacher uses to illustrate his urging that the believers of Hebrews not "**shrink back**." All of their human imperfections notwithstanding, the folk listed in Hebrews 11 evidenced an inner attitude of faith in God by remaining faithful to Him. From Enoch to the prophets, these believers fought the good fight; they did not "**shrink back**." Rather, they confidently endured in their commitment to God (Hebrews 10:35-39). Thus God both approved of and rewarded them (Hebrews 10:35, 38; 11:2, 39).

Amidst any trial of life, members of the community of faith have a choice: In the face of adversity they can please the Lord by remaining faithful, or they can displease God by turning away. But remember this--God has no delight in cheap confessions of faith that possess no staying power. Tough times will end when the Lord is comes back and gives His reward to the faithful (Hebrews

10:37).

Near to the end of his life the Apostle Paul wrote, "**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing**" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

What should we do when adversity threatens us and makes us want to quit? We already know the answer. We need to stay on task with what God has called us to do. In short, we must continue to faithfully live by faith.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Leon Morris, "Faith," **The New Bible Dictionary**, J.D. Douglas, Organizing Editor (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962) 410.

[2] *Emphasis Mine*, William Romaine, *Life of Faith*, cited in R.B. Girdlestone, **Synonyms of the Old Testament** (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1983) 122.

[3] Daniel B. Wallace, **Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 161.