

# Of Whom the World Is Not Worthy

by G.W. North

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of living by faith, not trying to do great things or achieve spectacular results, and highlights the significance of unremarkable faith and the miracle of Rahab's preservation.*

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11:1, Hebrews 11:30

**Topics:** "Living By Faith", "The Nature of God's Promises"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the importance of living by faith rather than striving for greatness, illustrating that the biblical figures mentioned in Hebrews 11 achieved their deeds through their daily faithfulness rather than spectacular acts. He highlights that faith is accessible to everyone, even those deemed unlikely, as exemplified by Rahab, whose simple act of faith led to her miraculous preservation. North argues that God desires a nation of ordinary people living faithfully, and that true faith often manifests in the mundane rather than the extraordinary. He warns against the dangers of misplaced expectations regarding God's promises, urging believers to hold fast to their faith while recognizing that not all promises will be fulfilled in their lifetime. Ultimately, he calls for a return to a faith that is patient and enduring, as demonstrated by the heroes of faith throughout scripture.

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## Transcript

Commencing this section the writer ceases recounting the stories of great individuals and making points from their exploits. Names of well-known men appear in these verses and we can read about them, but their particular works, though recorded in the Old Testament, are not recorded here. The focus now noticeably shifts from the particular to the general, and with this shift there is also an equally noticeable change of the strict chronological order previously observed. Names are set down as they occur to the writer instead of in the order they appear in history: David for instance is mentioned before Samuel and the prophets. For what the writer has in mind this makes no difference, either to him or to the truth, and is a clear indication of his intentions. Having shown that the birth and constitution of the nation was by faith, the writer is now wanting to speak about the people as a whole and not just about particular persons. This immediately becomes clear when we find that Joshua, Moses' successor, great man that he was, is not even mentioned; neither he nor the people appear in the one single text referring to happenings in Canaan; here it is: 'by faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days'. Amazingly, except for Rahab, no names are mentioned; the emphasis is on faith alone; neither Joshua's nor the people's faith finds notice, but just faith.

So now the writer has brought us back to the essential message -- faith, not men of faith. 'Live by faith', he is saying. He is not exhorting them to try and do great things, or to strive to become great men or women, but simply to live by faith. From a superficial reading of the chapter the impression could be gained that he is challenging people to attempt great things for God, but really he is not. Instead he raises the question, 'How, do you think, did Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses and all the rest I have mentioned accomplish these wonderful things?' The answer immediately rises to our lips, 'by faith', which is manifestly true; but if he had answered his own question he would have said, 'they lived by faith'; each one of them proved God in daily living. Not one of them attempted to do great things and God never asked them to; what He wanted of them was that by faith each should prove His faithfulness in the humdrum things of daily life. Let every one of us learn this same lesson and attempt nothing until God tells us to do so, and when He does speak let us obey Him wholeheartedly. We may say, 'I will try', perhaps half believing we cannot do it or that we shall fail -- not if God says so -- no one has ever obeyed Him and failed.

Amram and Jochebed, Moses' parents, hid their son for three months before putting him in the bulrushes where he was discovered by the princess; they did it by faith says the writer. It was a work of faith, but God never told them to do it; He did not need to, they were living by faith. They saw something in their child Moses (which is not at all a surprising thing) so they decided to act in the manner now so famous; it was perfectly natural and they were not afraid of the king. How important it was that they should do that; we eulogise Moses, and rightly so, but had his parents not been living by faith it is almost certain that Moses might never have survived. What would have happened then? We need not speculate, God was overruling everything and watching over the babe to bring His purposes to pass. Who then could imagine failure? But how true it is also that, except He find faith on the earth, how shall He do His great works among the sons of men?

Unremarkable faith, that is, faith which does nothing spectacular or sensational, but patiently continues in well doing is great faith well-pleasing to God. He can raise up an Abraham or a Moses, or His great kings and prophets, to do remarkable and spectacular things if He will, but such men and events are rare; what God wants and needs is a whole nation of ordinary people living as He wants. His delight is with the sons of men, ordinary folk with no special qualifications or commendations, natural or spiritual, either in the world or in the church. It is said of the Jews in Christ's day, 'The common people heard Him gladly'. It is of great significance, perhaps of greater significance than we at first realise, that the final person whose name and particular act of faith is recorded in this section is Rahab the harlot. What a surprise! She was a bad woman and not even an Israelite! She did nothing spectacular, why should she be singled out when Joshua was entirely passed over? The answer to this question which may seem so puzzling is found in the writer's threefold purpose: (1) to emphasise the life of faith above particular acts of faith; (2) to show that this simplicity of faith is available to anybody, even the unlikeliest of persons; (3) to point to a miracle of major proportions lying in scripture mostly undiscovered but highlighted in Rahab.

The first two points need no further emphasis beyond what has already been said, but the third needs some elaboration. The phrasing of the verse preceding the one in which Rahab is mentioned is most remarkable, every bit as remarkable as that in which her name occurs; they should be read together: 'By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days. By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace'. The miracle lies as open before our eyes today as it did before the eyes of Israel on the day it happened, when the people shouted at God's command and the walls fell down. But what happened to Rahab's house? It was

built on the wall. However was she saved? It was not possible -- the walls fell down. She was saved by a miracle, a miracle within a miracle. There is no miracle but that there is also one or many more within it. The first major miracle was the total collapse of the walls; the second major miracle, twinned with the first, was Rahab's total preservation. How she was saved from perishing with the rest only the Lord knows. Did He demolish the rest of the walls and leave the tiny part on which her house was perched standing intact? Did He hold her up, or was she and all she had, and her father's household also, borne up on angels' wings and deposited gently down on earth well out of the battle-zone away from harm? Certainly she was not rescued by men, for all Israel were standing right back, away from the walls, (a bowshot at least) when the miracle happened. All Israel would have been on the lookout for her house on the wall, trying to discern the scarlet line in the window and believing she was going to be rescued, and wondering what would happen when the wall fell down. How was she to be preserved? They were as ignorant as she. No less than now they saw, but only through a glass darkly, and through the dust that rose over all and blotted out the whole miracle.

God had not told anybody what was going to happen about Rahab, not even Joshua apparently. Their instructions were to march in silence around the city once a day for six days, then on the seventh day they must march round it seven times; six times in silence, finalising it all the seventh time by shouting and blowing trumpets. At that the wall crumpled, falling down flat outwards; all that every man had to do was to go straight up over the rubble, sword in hand, into the city. Rahab with her family and goods were the only ones saved; no-one and nothing else was preserved from the destruction. The walls fell down by faith, but not Joshua's nor anyone else's outstanding faith; they fell as a result of corporate faith; that is, because of their obedience. Rahab was included in the miracle because she obeyed God too. Although she did not know it, in the mind of God she had made her preservation sure when she received the spies in peace, and placed the scarlet cord in the window. The miraculous preservation was only the manifestation of it. The miracle of Jericho was outstanding: God did it all, but only because everyone involved in it, and for whom it was done, did exactly as He said. God chose to do it that way.

Something else has been made increasingly clear by the writer in course of this chapter also, and we must not miss it, namely the shift from direct communication to indirect communication. At the beginning of the chapter the writer is at pains to tell us that God spoke to people directly, Noah for instance, and Abraham, but not now; God spoke to the leaders, in this case Moses and Joshua, and they relayed His word to the people. This departure from former practice was quite deliberate on God's part; it was part of the policy He was pursuing in His dealings with men. It is instructive also to note that there is no indication in the first part of the chapter that God ever spoke to either of the men of faith who lived prior to Noah. There is no record that God instructed Abel to offer the acceptable sacrifice to Him, or that He told Enoch or anyone that He was going to translate him; God just took him. It is said of Enoch that he 'walked with God and was not', so it is difficult to believe that he walked with God and that God never spoke to him, but whether or not God told him He was going to take him away from the earth we cannot know. It is the lack of positive statement about these things on the part of the Hebrews writer which draws attention to the idea that God may well prefer to use a different method than governing a multitude through one man.

With the advent of Noah into the list comes the information that God spoke to him, giving him the warning about the approaching judgement. We know from the Genesis account that the Lord also gave him instructions for the building of the ark. All this was by direct communication, there was no intermediary, it was just between Noah and God; no third party was involved. It was the same also with Abraham and with Moses, God spoke directly to them and also to Isaac and Jacob before Moses, but with the advent of

Moses and the emergence of the Israel nation the pattern changes. God still continued to speak to Moses personally, and so the era of speaking to a nation through one man commenced. This began in Egypt, there the Lord spoke indirectly to the people through Moses, and after He had brought them out of Egypt He continued to do so at their request. At Sinai they begged God not to speak directly to them and asked for Moses to be their intermediary in all matters appertaining to God. The Lord accepted the position and their request, after all it was the natural and most practicable thing to do.

From that original position of one prophet and one voice to the nation the Lord later moved to the new position of many prophets and many voices speaking in Israel, and so it continued. As the years progressed, the judges came and added their voices, and later still the kings. Some of these were good spiritual men, but not all: voices and gift multiplied, but there was very little of the word of God in the land. So bad did this situation become that Isaiah, in his day, had to cry out, 'To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them'. Anticipating such a day and to offset the damage of it, the Lord, instructed Moses to place the law and the testimony in the ark to be kept inviolable by the priests. By inscribing His own testimony into the law, writing it ineradicably into stone He ensured that to that degree it should not fade away but be everlasting. This was to be the foundation of the nation's righteousness and the ultimate test of every word that purported to be spoken in His name thereafter. But the people ignored God's law, insisting upon choosing their own kings, and ordering their own kingdoms and listening to the prophets they preferred. So the Lord took away His testimony and His law from them and ceased to raise up His own prophets and sent the people into captivity and unto dispersion, where they remain to this day.

Throughout all this time faith was scarcely to be found on earth; it still burned low in some hearts, but only a few, so to complete the chapter the writer gathers up the men and women of faith and encompasses all these in a few short verses of glorious testimony. The named and the nameless, the famous and the unknown, all are placed together and praised equally because they all obtained the good report through faith. Whoever they were they share the honours and have received the rewards of the faithful, and how well they deserve them. The world was not worthy of such people, yet the Lord continued to raise them up, each in their day, knowing that they would be hated, hounded, hurt, tried, tortured, tormented, poverty stricken outcasts, despised, rejected, and in the end many of them murdered. And what for? For a promise that was never fulfilled to them. Such is faith, and what it can accomplish in the hearts and lives of the faceless and the anonymous, as well as the famous ones.

What an ending to a chapter about faith; but that is how it started. Abel acted in faith and was killed for his pains. Of all the people mentioned in the chapter Enoch alone is the one whose life ended in what is considered to be the ultimate glory; he entered into what to the Hebrews was the promise: he was translated. All the others lived by faith, worked by faith, walked by faith, witnessed by faith, worshipped by faith; some of them obtained promises through faith, but not one of them received the promise. We are told of those who lived in the land of promise and obtained promises in that land, and of others who saw the promises afar off and were persuaded of them and embraced them, and thereby became pilgrims and strangers on the earth. But of all the promises that had ever been made to any one of them, not one received the fulfilment of the promise, though it had been made by God from the very beginning.

Quite possibly Abraham, when he received the promise from God about the seed, thought of it as the promise; we can imagine him speaking of it to Sarah as the promise of all the promises God had made him. Undoubtedly to him and eventually to Sarah it was the greatest of them all, but it was not the promise that God counted to be the promise. Promises made by God to individuals for individual blessings to be

fulfilled in that person's experience only, though they are wonderful in fulfilment, and perhaps affect others also, do not and can never warrant the description 'the promise'. The promise, though in the first instance it may be made to a person, is not made to that individual only, it is made to the whole of mankind for universal acceptance. God made this kind of promise to Noah after the flood, and set His bow as a token of it in the clouds.

When, in the presence of the couple in Eden, He made the promise 'the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head', it was the same also. The promise made in Eden was for universal acceptance, but Adam and Eve misinterpreted God's meaning. They had no idea of His intentions, consequently they thought that Cain was the seed; how wrong they were. They were not to be blamed though, for beyond the bare promise God never went on to explain Himself to them. Neither Cain in the beginning, nor Isaac in his day, was the promised seed; the promise God gave, though possible of local application, was made about the coming of His Son. There is no suggestion in scripture anywhere that Abraham thought the seed promised to him was the promised seed; it was not, and he did not think it was. Possibly, if they had been asked, both he and Sarah would have said that it was the greatest promise made to them, and its fulfilment was joy unspeakable.

Although Adam and Eve made a mistake about the original promise, properly considered it was really far too clear to have been misunderstood. God spoke in such specific language; He said it was to be the seed of the woman; the man was not mentioned. It is quite understandable that Adam and Eve should have thought that God meant them to interpret the promise as they did, it was so natural, but they were wrong. Abraham's understanding would have been much clearer when God made promise to him concerning the seed: there was no ambiguity about it; 'thy seed', He said to Abraham, and Abraham knew that the seed was to be his very own. If he knew about what happened in Eden (and it is uncertain that he did), Abraham knew that, although given to him by a miracle from God, the seed would not be the seed promised in the beginning, for it would not be exclusively the seed of the woman. So then, although many of God's promises were fulfilled to Abraham, not all of them were.

From a reading of the whole epistle there can be little doubt why the writer commenced this chapter as he did, telling the Hebrews that faith is the substance of things hoped for, and then passing on almost immediately to say that by faith we understand that the ages were fitted together by the word of God. What he is saying is that by faith a man can only live in hope of some promises being fulfilled in his lifetime, because they are not all scheduled by God for fulfilment in the age in which he is living. Some promises should be, and ought to be, fulfilled in the lifetime of every man living by faith, for they are given for man's appropriation; but, however much faith he may have, others will not be fulfilled to him. Some of these may be entertained as hopes by faith, but to attempt to do anything other than believe in them as hopes, and to live by faith in the light of that hope, is to lay oneself open to bitter disappointment and sad failure, perhaps even disillusionment. Thousands of Old Testament saints lived by faith in the land of promise without receiving the promises or the fulfilment of them; this did not prevent them from accepting those promises as their inheritance though, seeing them afar off they embraced them. The man of faith takes to himself promises made in the past, and embraces the anticipated fulfilment of promises yet to be made in the future, though none of them were, or may not be made to him personally. By this men of old confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims in the earth and God is not ashamed to be called their God. Man is saved by audacious hope, as well as by courageous faith.

As pointed out earlier, this section on faith which commenced with the words, 'Now the just shall live by faith', is preceded by these words, 'ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye

might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry'. 'The promise'. Not one of those of whom the author speaks in the eleventh chapter received this promise; they received many promises, but not this one, as he so outspokenly says in the last verse. The age when it should be fulfilled had not yet been reached, so the writer tells the Hebrews that in this respect they were not being treated differently from their forebears; they just had to accept that and get on with life. To them, as to everyone else in this age, what was promise, even the promise to so many, had been fulfilled. What was promise in Eden and the promise within the promise given to Abraham, was fulfilled at Bethlehem. Similarly what was promise in the upper room was fulfilled at Pentecost. Each in its day was the promise; but, as the ages fitted together by God ran their course, what was the promise in one age ceased to be the promise in the next; God fulfilled it and another took its place. The fulfilment of a promise ends an age of hope, faith then appropriates it. God then makes another age-abiding promise, and thereby lays the foundation of another age-abiding of faith for the saints to lay hold of in their hearts. This in turn becomes the foundation of life, that they should live in that hope and never let it go -- certainly not draw back from it. They and we must hold fast the confession of our faith without wavering because He who promised is faithful, and in its time He will fulfil every promise He has made.

When God makes promises of this class they are fixed in time; they are not eternal but are appointments of God for a certain period of time. Every one of these is made for the time or age which is ushered in with the promise, and each is the respective promise for that age. When an age is concluded, the promise is no more promise because it is fulfilled: this being so, hope is fulfilled with it, and by it passes into consummation. Before Christ left the earth He made two major promises which were to be fulfilled by Him at either end of the oncoming age, and would embrace it. The first was the promise of the coming of the Spirit; the second was the promise of His own coming again to earth. Each in its order and importance was the promise: (1) 'behold I send the promise of the Father upon you'; (2) 'I will come again'. The first was for the spiritual birth and life of His Church, the second was for the sequential progression of God's plan for the ages: these promises are still as important for men today as they were on the day they were made.

It is vitally necessary that everyone ensures that the first of these promises passes into his or her experience and becomes personal history; until that time the fulfilment of the promise must be that person's hope, and should be sought wholeheartedly. The second promise can ever be only a hope until the consummation of the age. Its fulfilment will effectively close this present age and open another. God has already stated His promise for that new age, 'Behold I make all things new'; John says, 'I saw a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21 v.1). Like the second of the above promises this is still future and awaits fulfilment. No person, while still on earth, expects this promise to be fulfilled to him or her as an individual; like the children of faith spoken of by the writer we embrace it and live in the light of it, pressing forward as true pilgrims and strangers should in full expectation of hope.

This life-giving hope and the determination which springs from it had apparently vanished from the Hebrews to whom the letter was written. They were second or third generation Christians and were in a very dangerous condition, which danger the writer was very concerned to make clear to them. He asks them this question, 'if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression ... received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him ...?' The Lord was the first generation, those that heard Him became the second, and those who received the letter were the third. Within so short a time the vision had faded and become lost because of neglect; the great salvation had

become inconsequential to them, the concentration of their lives was on other things. Therefore they had dropped out of the race and had ceased to be pilgrims; no longer were they strangers on the earth; they belonged here. Faith had either vanished or well-nigh vanished from their hearts.

One of the major causes of this spiritual declension was disappointment; men were disillusioned, asking questions to which no answer was forthcoming. They had been fed on false hopes, misinterpretations arising from misunderstandings of promises and of prophecy, all of which give rise to wishful thinking. Peter put one of the current questions which mocking unbelievers raised in these words, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' These and others like them were rampant in their day: tragically enough the believers had most probably stumbled over the same thing also. They had become victims of the falsely engendered belief that the Lord would return within their lifetime. The kind of questions they were asking, though not in the same spirit, is, 'Why has He not come back as He promised?' Although in their minds they had not set specific dates, they did have set expectations, and expectations ungrounded in fact are dangerous. Mistakes enthusiastically propagated among the unsuspecting and the untaught become destructive fantasies: they had brought fearful damage among the saints. The Lord once said to His people that He would give them an expected end, they were therefore right to have expectations and on them to build their hopes. The important thing for us all is that we have the correct expectations, for, rightly or wrongly, expectations engender faith; people tend to believe in what they expect, and vice versa. Expectations therefore must be rightly founded; but if that which ought only to be hope is mistakenly thought to be faith, then hope becomes expectation falsely called hope, which, in process of thought, becomes 'faith', when it is no such thing. The end of this kind of misconstruction can be disastrous, almost fatal, as in the case of many of these Hebrews; hence the many stern warnings in the epistle. The scripture makes plain that faith is the substance of hope; let us all beware of trying to make hope the substance of faith.

Faith in God's long term promises should be strongly held by every faithful heart; but, unless God commits Himself in plainest language to fulfil these promises within a certain period of time, they may only be held in hope, which must never be called faith. The promise of Christ's future advent made by both Himself and the angels of the ascension carried no time element. 'I will come again', He said; 'He shall come', the angels said. The promise was real, but the time factor never entered into it. 'Yet a little while', says the writer here, but in what time scale he was thinking he does not say; he does disclose, though, that faith understands that ages are fitted together, or framed, by the word of God. This knowledge should have been sufficient to prevent the Hebrews from becoming unbalanced in their thinking. By their own experience and by the writer's words, as well as by the whole of Hebrew heredity and history, they should have concluded that the 'little while' ought to be understood to be an unspecified time of uncertain length, most probably of quite considerable duration. Certainly they had no grounds for thinking that the Lord would return in their own lifetime. He had not said so, neither had the apostles; yet, because the Lord had not come for them according to their interpretation of the promise, they gave up and, to God's grief, ceased from their pilgrimage. The consequences were sad and grave.

What if, after fifty years of toil, Noah had given up? What if Moses at seventy five years of age had given in? What if Abraham .....? But we are exhorted to take our eyes off all these; they are all there; they are witnesses to true faith and patience and endurance, and their united testimony is invaluable, but we must resolutely look away from them unto Jesus. He did not come and live on the earth in order to be whisked away in something akin to a secret rapture as was Enoch. He came 'to do the will of God', as He said. To Him and to this, the writer points the Hebrews, 'after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the

promise', he says. Enoch was translated out of the world, Methuselah (and of course thousands of others doubtless) was taken away from all the trouble by death, but not so Noah; he had to patiently go through and endure everything to the end.

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