

As Christians, we don't worship the saints; yet, we can look at those who have gone before us and marvel at what they did—or, better, what the Lord accomplished through them. Our epistle gives us a list of saints to ponder today.

I. The “Hall of Faith”

We begin with Abel, son of Adam and Eve. Our text tells us that he—a herder of sheep— “offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” Why was it more excellent? Because it was offered by faith: rather than believe that his sacrifice earned God's favor, Abel offered it because he believed that the Seed of the Woman would be born to save him from sin—thus his sacrifice testified that he was righteous before God, for the sake of Jesus who was to come. Abel suffered for his sacrifice: Cain took him out into the field and killed him. Thus the first shepherd was also the first to die because of sin, awaiting the Good Shepherd who would be led out of the city and crucified for the sins of the world.

Next in the text is Enoch, the one whom we know the least. Enoch was a righteous man and an ancestor of Jesus. Beyond that, here is what we know: according to Jude 14, he was a prophet who warned of God's judgment against sinners. Further, we know that Enoch did not see death: rather, says Genesis 5:24, “he walked with God and was not, because God took him.” Enoch did not die. Why? Because of his own righteousness? No—because he lived by faith in Jesus, who would taste death for him, and rise again. Faith is the key ingredient to eternal life here, “for without faith it is impossible to please God.” We'll flesh that out in a little bit.

Next in line is Noah, with whose story you are probably familiar. Noah and his family, eight total, lived as believers in a world that had otherwise rejected God. The Lord warned him that the Flood was coming and promised deliverance through the ark. Noah believed the Lord's promise and built the ark; and during the decades that this required, he proclaimed God's Word (2 Peter 2:5) and warned others of impending judgment. They didn't listen, and so they were swept away. Noah and his family were delivered as heirs of righteousness. “Heirs” is an excellent word here: they did not earn righteousness. They received it by faith for the sake of Jesus, who would endure the flood of His Father's wrath on the cross, that He might wash their sins away.

Our text next speaks of Abraham, who was “called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance.” He had a nice home in Ur, yet he believed the Lord's promise that he would receive the land of Canaan; so he packed up his household and left all that he knew. The Lord kept his promise, and Abraham dwelt in the Promised Land; unfortunately, nobody else outside of his family believed it. Therefore, while all of Canaan belonged to Abraham, all who lived there viewed him as a stranger and foreigner. (When Sarah died, Abraham had to purchase land for her grave!) Despite all of this, Abraham trusted God's promise and remained there. He lived by faith in Jesus, who would not be properly received when He came to dwell among His people, but would be the foundation for the City of God, the Church, forever.

With Abraham comes Sarah, childless throughout her life. At ninety years old, she heard God promise her a son—an absolutely laughable idea, since she was far past childbearing. But the Lord promised, Sarah believed, and Isaac was born to her and Abraham. Why? Because Sarah believed the promise by faith—faith in her descendant, the miracle Son who would be born to the virgin Mary, to save her from her sin.

We hear of these five saints, and it's quite a list. One died for his faith. The next preached against evil and never died. A third built a boat against all common sense and appearances. The fourth left his home for a land that was his, even though no one else recognized it; and with the fifth, he fathered a miracle baby when he and his wife were in their nineties. Why did they do these things? How did they do these things? The text is clear: by faith.

And what else does the text say of these saints? It says that they not only lived by faith, but died in faith. They saw very few of God's promises fulfilled, but they trusted that God would keep them; therefore, they died believing in what was yet to come. They willingly faced suffering, ridicule, hardship and death in this life because they believed they were just strangers here. They counted their lives and livelihood nothing because they had a different homeland—an eternal, heavenly country.

Thus our text honors them with this epitaph: “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

I, for one, would be honored to have such a statement on my gravestone. And perhaps you find yourself saying, "I wish that I had that sort of faith. I can't imagine leaving home for a foreign land or building the ark or suffering death for a sacrifice. I know that isn't me. I'm not like that. I wish I could have faith like them."

II. Faith for You

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice. You do have faith like them. You have the same faith of Abel and Enoch, Noah and Abraham and Sarah. I give you a few passages to consider.

First off, Ephesians 2:8, 9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." What is the gift of God? Faith is—along with grace. Faith is given to you by God with forgiveness. It is not something earned by works. Faith is a gift—that you believe in Jesus is a gift from God. It has to be this way. If we truly believe the Scriptures that we were born dead in sin, then we couldn't make ourselves alive. God had to give us life, which He does by giving us forgiveness and faith.

Now, God has given you forgiveness for Jesus' sake, just as He did for Abel, Enoch and the rest—because like you, they were all born dead in sin. It's the same Jesus and the same forgiveness. Likewise, He gives you the same faith.

The next verse is 1 Corinthians 12:3: "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." This teaches us two things. First, the gift of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. Second, what does faith do? It believes in Jesus. It clings to the Savior and the forgiveness He has won. To have faith is to believe that Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, became flesh and died on the cross for you. You cannot believe in Jesus without faith. By faith, you believe in Him, and so forgiveness is yours.

Now, who died for the sins of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah? Jesus did. In whom did they believe? In Jesus, the Savior who was to come. Their faith held on to Jesus, just like your faith does. Same Jesus, same faith. Thus you have the same faith as these saints. Therefore, you have the same forgiveness, Savior, salvation and eternal life.

We want to add, however, that the Bible speaks of strong faith and weak faith. Strong faith is better able to resist temptation and accomplish more good works than weak faith. Think of it this way: if you have a heartbeat, you are alive. You're alive whether your heartbeat is weak or strong—though a strong heartbeat is far better than a weak one. Likewise, you are alive in Christ whether your faith is weak or strong—though a strong faith is far better. How is your faith strengthened? Romans 10:17 tells you: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ." The Holy Spirit gives and strengthens your faith through the Word of God. That's why you rejoice daily to remember your Baptism, where God gave you faith by water and the Word. That's why your faith can't wait to get to church, to hear the Word of God and gather strength. That's why your faith delights to feast upon the Savior's body and blood, present in, with and under bread and wine by the Word of God.

In short, faith is a gift given by God, as it was to the saints in our text. Faith clings to Jesus and His forgiveness, as did the saints in our text. Faith comes by hearing the Word—as you and the saints in our text have heard God's Word.

Therefore, if you believe that faith is something you've come up with in order to please God, repent. It is His gift to you for your salvation. To claim it is your doing is to rob God of glory for yourself. If faith is something you do, then it is your work and it is never certain. If faith is God's gift, then your salvation is sure.

If you believe that faith is all about getting God to do what you want Him to, repent. Faith is about clinging to Jesus and His forgiveness, and faith always prays, "Our Father, thy will be done, not mine."

Where you have neglected to hear and read God's Word on a regular basis, or where you have not availed yourself of His Supper, repent. In doing so, you have withheld food from the faith God has given, and so you have weakened that gift. You may believe it has made no difference, but it has. Repent, and rejoice that Christ has died for this sin, too, that you might be forgiven and strengthened in faith once more.

Rejoice! God gives you faith and counts you among His saints for Jesus' sake. You may not suffer death like Abel because of it, though you will suffer; and God grants you the faith to endure. In the meantime, too, He rejoices in your works, because you are His child for Jesus' sake; and a good Father

always rejoices in His children. You will not avoid death like Enoch unless the Lord first returns, but you have been given the same faith. Therefore, like Enoch God says of you, "I am well pleased with you, because Jesus has taken away all of your sins." You may not be sent to a faraway land to live as a stranger as was Abraham; but like Abraham, your destination is sure: the New Jerusalem forever, whose foundation is Christ. And like Sarah, by faith you know that the one who promises is faithful, and so you can be sure of your salvation.

Your life may or may not display great acts of obedience like theirs. But of this you can be certain: the same Savior, Jesus, gives you the same forgiveness and faith. Therefore, this is true, too: God is not ashamed to be called your God, and He has prepared a city for you—all for the sake of Jesus. For in Him, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen