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Faith Moves First: Trusting the Time-Bridge of God's Faithfulness

Introduction

Faith, in the modern imagination, is often misunderstood as irrational optimism or emotional defiance of facts. But for the writer of Hebrews, faith is neither blind nor static. It is deeply rooted, theologically rich, and intimately tied to time. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). This classic declaration is not an abstract metaphysical concept—it is the lifeblood of perseverance for a people called to move before they feel ready. Hebrews 11 presents faith not as a feeling or an inner resource, but as a form of knowing rooted in divine promise.

In a world of instant results and digital certainty, biblical faith requires a kind of spiritual defiance. It is not the reward for having clarity—it is the willingness to walk while waiting. This essay explores the theological dimensions of Hebrews 11 through the lens of "Faith Moves First," uncovering how biblical trust is formed, sustained, and stretched across time. Drawing on Pentecostal sensibilities, contemporary theologians such as James K. A. Smith and Wolfhart Pannenberg, and ancient Greek word studies, we will trace how true faith engages the unseen not as fantasy but as foundational reality.

Faith as Substance and Conviction: Beyond Optimism

The structure of Hebrews 11:1 is dense with theological weight: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The Greek words *hypostasis* (ὑπόστασις) and *elenchos* (ἔλεγχος) are central to understanding the passage.

Craig S. Keener, in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, notes that *hypostasis* was used in legal and business contexts to describe a title deed—a document confirming legal ownership of a property not yet possessed. Faith, then, is not wishful thinking; it is the "receipt" of an unseen promise.[1] It functions not as subjective hope but as objective evidence. Similarly, *elenchos* carries legal connotations of proof, conviction, or cross-examination. As a result, faith is both inwardly assured and outwardly anchored.

In this framework, faith does not wait for circumstances to align before declaring truth. It acts on the certainty of God's character. The passage is not primarily concerned with mental ascent but with active trust. To believe is to move. To walk by faith is not to abandon reason but to reorient one's reasoning around the Word of God.

As Dr. Hood rightly notes, “Faith doesn’t guess, it knows. Faith is not blind—it’s convicted.” The confidence here is not grounded in evidence we can manipulate but in a divine Word we are called to obey. This epistemological shift redefines how we perceive action in the life of the believer: obedience becomes the natural outflow of internal certainty.

Temporal Tension and the Not-Yet

Many readers of Hebrews 11 assume it contrasts heaven and earth, the visible and invisible. However, theologians like Anthony C. Thiselton and Oscar Cullmann argue that the primary tension is not spatial but temporal.[2] Hebrews speaks of faith’s orientation toward the “not-yet”—the promised future that has not arrived but is guaranteed.

Verse 3 connects this to creation: “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” This verse ties present reality to the unseen creative power of God. If creation itself is grounded in the invisible word, then the believer’s life must also be anchored in that same invisible but reliable reality.

James K. A. Smith, in *How to Inhabit Time*, emphasizes that we are not detached minds floating above history. “We are storied, time-bound creatures who carry our past and are drawn by futures.”[3] Faith, therefore, is the only adequate response for creatures whose existence is shaped by delay. To walk by faith is to live suspended in the already and not yet—grounded in the promise, moved by the unseen.

This connects to what Wolfhart Pannenberg called *time-bridging identity*.[4] Because faith spans decades, even generations, it must be rooted not in the believer’s strength but in God’s unchanging character. “The longer the period [between promise and fulfillment], the more constant the identity must be if the goal is to be reached.”[5] Thus, God’s faithfulness becomes the bridge over which faith travels.

Faith and Testimony: The Public Shape of Trust

Hebrews 11:2 states, “For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.” The Greek word here is *emartyrēthēsan* (ἐμαρτυρήθησαν)—to be given a testimony. This does not mean the elders earned God’s approval through performance. Rather, their lives aligned with God’s promise so convincingly that God could point to them as evidence of trust. Their lives became theological arguments.

This sharply critiques a culture of immediacy. Testimonies are not microwaved—they are marinated across years of fidelity. In an era that favors viral moments and public optics, Hebrews 11 invites us to consider faith as a long obedience in the same direction. The lives of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob became holy texts—not because they controlled outcomes, but because they obeyed before the outcome was visible.

Pentecostal spirituality thrives in this context. Testimonies are not private affirmations; they are public declarations of divine activity over time. The practice of testimony-telling in

Pentecostal churches is not merely celebratory—it is formational. It reshapes the community's imagination by grounding identity in what God has done and is doing. As Bishop has famously said, "Faith is a fact and faith is an act—the difference is in the doing." But that doing always includes duration.

Faith in Motion: Abraham and Sarah's Journey

Hebrews 11:8–11 returns us to the story of Abraham and Sarah—not as moral exemplars, but as archetypes of faith-in-motion. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called… and he went out, not knowing where he was going" (v. 8). This unknowing is not a deficiency; it is the essence of faith. The text praises not his certainty, but his willingness to move despite ambiguity.

Verse 9 highlights Abraham's life as a stranger in a foreign land, living in tents. This nomadic life, filled with impermanence, contrasts sharply with his longing for "a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." The Greek phrase *polis echousan themelious* (πόλιν ἔχουσαν θεμελίους) suggests permanence constructed by divine agency. His eyes were on what God was building—even as he inhabited what felt temporary.

Sarah's inclusion in verse 11 deepens the theology. She "received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful who had promised." Faith here is not just biological—it is relational. She trusted the promiser, not the prognosis. Her faith was not in her ability to produce, but in God's ability to fulfill.

Both Abraham and Sarah embody the reality that faith moves first—not when it makes sense, not when outcomes are secure—but when the Word of God has spoken. They model what it means to live as pilgrims, carrying promises not yet fulfilled but guaranteed by the One who calls.

Faith vs. the Culture of Clarity

Contemporary culture often conflates faith with strategic vision. Corporate literature defines vision as "a clear, measurable image of the future used to guide present decisions." While this is useful in project management, it distorts the biblical meaning of faith. Hebrews 11 reveals a sharp contrast: biblical vision is not something you see—it is someone you trust.

Dr. Hood reminds us that faith is not a vague desire or positive attitude. It is conviction (*elenchos*)—proof that has been tested, examined, and found trustworthy. Faith is not "blind" in the pejorative sense; it is perceptive in ways that transcend sight. It walks not because it sees where it's going, but because it knows Who is going with it.

Faith, then, is resistance. It pushes back against the demand for perfect clarity and immediate outcomes. It does not require a five-year plan but a present-tense yes. It thrives not in certainty but in communion with the faithful One.

Practical Reflection

In light of this theological framework, how should we then live?

First, we must reframe delay. The space between promise and fulfillment is not wasted—it is formative. God uses time to shape trust. Faith does not short-circuit process; it walks through it.

Second, we must release control. Hebrews 11 does not showcase people who had airtight plans but those who responded to divine interruptions. They obeyed without knowing the destination.

Third, we must deepen memory. The testimonies in Hebrews 11 are not spiritual trophies but reminders. They anchor us in the reliability of God when we are tempted to doubt. Remembering is a spiritual discipline that sustains faith across time.

Finally, we must embrace movement. Faith moves first. It does not wait for cultural readiness or personal confidence. It walks, builds, sows, and serves—not because it sees everything clearly, but because it trusts the One who is faithful.

Conclusion

"To inhabit time well," writes James K. A. Smith, "is to receive our lives as unfolding stories that are neither wholly determined by the past nor aimlessly adrift into the future. It is to live in hope—rooted in memory, attuned to the present, drawn forward by promise."[6]

Faith, in this biblical and Pentecostal sense, is not a mystical abstraction. It is an anchored walk in the dark. It is the assurance that the God who spoke is still speaking. It is the conviction that what we do not yet see is already real. It is the courage to move first—ready or not.

References

1. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, InterVarsity Press, 1993.
2. Anthony C. Thiselton and Oscar Cullmann, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans Commentary Series.
3. James K. A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now*, Brazos Press, 2022.
4. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*, Eerdmans, 1991.
5. Ibid., p. 202.
6. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time*, p. 43.