

August 8
Lesson 10 (NIV)

A NECESSARY FAITH

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Hebrews 11:32–40](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Hebrews 11](#); [13:1–19](#)

Hebrews 11:1–8, 13–16

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

³ 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.

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸ 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.

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¹³ 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. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ 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.



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KEY VERSE

Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. —Hebrews 11:1

CONFIDENT HOPE

Unit 3: Faith Gives Us Hope

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the definition of *faith*.
2. Explain the meaning and significance of the key verse.
3. List one change each in the categories of thought, behavior, and speech by which he or she will become more of a stranger to the world.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. The Power of Examples

B. Lesson Context

I. The Meaning of Faith (Hebrews 11:1–3)

A. Things Hoped For, Not Seen (vv. 1–2)

B. Things Created (v. 3)

II. Examples of Faith (Hebrews 11:4–8)

A. Abel (v. 4)

B. Enoch (vv. 5–6)

C. Noah (v. 7)

Hellfire and Brimstone

D. Abraham (v. 8)

III. The Goal of Faith (Hebrews 11:13–16)

A. Promises Far Off (v. 13)

B. A Country Not Visible (vv. 14–15)

C. A City God Prepares (v. 16)

Looking for the City

Conclusion

A. Imitators of the Faithful

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Abel *Ay-buhl.*

Cain *Cayn.*

Enoch *E-nock.*

Platonic *Pluh-ton-ik or Pleh-ton-ik.*

Introduction

A. The Power of Examples

We live in an age that puts little stock in heroes. This might seem to be a strange assertion on the surface. After all, superhero movies have dominated at the box office for several years now. Consider, though, that the characters at the center of these movies are in categories all their own—amazing to watch but impossible to imitate.

It is much more common in our storytelling to play up the flaws and the personal weaknesses of those heroes who might be realistically presented as worthy of imitation. It is also common to highlight the antihero. This is a central figure who lacks traditional heroic qualities.

This tendency carries over into the world outside of the cinema. Longstanding cultural heroes are regularly brought up for reevaluation and found wanting, etc. Today's text presents challenges: In what ways are the historical figures in our lesson worthy of emulating as faith heroes despite their weaknesses? Should the designation *antihero* be applied to any? Or is there even such a thing as an antihero in a biblical sense? So many questions!

B. Lesson Context

Older commentaries on Hebrews focus on a limited set of questions regarding authorship, recipients, and its worthiness to be considered Scripture. For example, a well-known commentary published in 1876 made an extended argument for authorship by the apostle Paul, a position held by almost no one in our own day.

The author went on to assert with confidence that the letter was addressed to Jewish converts to Christianity in Palestine. Finally, the writer argued for the book's inclusion in Scripture on four bases: it (1) was written by Paul, (2) was quoted as Scripture, (3) is found in the oldest versions of Scripture, and (4) features internal evidences for such inclusion (namely, its teaching is in harmony with the rest of Scripture).

With the passing of a century and a half since publication of that commentary, we can assert that we know both more and less about the background of Hebrews than we did then. Modern commentaries reflect the wealth of knowledge that we now have about the Jewish and Greek cultural, philosophical, and religious environment in which the letter was written. All of this enriches our understanding of the letter, but gets us no closer to an answer to some of the most basic questions that we still have. Chief among those is the question of who wrote it.

Even though no author is specified, a better understanding of the contexts mentioned above and of the rhetorical skill that lies behind the composition of the letter tells us a lot about the author. The person was educated, based on the quality of the Greek writing. The author also knew Greek culture and philosophy, interacting with both in argument and examples.

Although [Hebrews 11](#) is often treated as a stand-alone unit of Scripture, it is important to note that the writer of the letter has been building toward it by the time it is reached. Although we do not cover them in today's lesson, the themes of faith and patient endurance, touched on in [Hebrews 10:35–39](#), provide the launching point for the discussion of faith in chapter 11. We can see the author building on the idea of faith as pilgrimage as far back as chapters 3 and 4. With that, we turn to the text.

I. The Meaning of Faith

(HEBREWS 11:1–3)

A. Things Hoped For, Not Seen (vv. 1–2)

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

The phrase *what we hope for* reminds us of the centrality of hope in the overall argument of this letter (example: [Hebrews 6:16–20](#)). For that matter, it reminds us of the way in which faith and hope are linked throughout the New Testament (examples: [1 Corinthians 13:13](#); [Galatians 5:5](#); [Colossians 1:5, 23](#)). The phrase *what we do not see* calls to mind the Platonic philosophical distinction between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual. In this line of thinking, those things that are invisible are more real and are actually perfected, whereas physical objects are only shadows of the real things. Although Platonic philosophy is not Christian thinking, we can affirm that the spiritual realm is real, has consequences in the lives we live now, and offers greater hope than what we experience in our physical lives today.

But what does it mean that faith is *confidence in what we hope for*, or that it is *assurance about what we do not see*? The meanings are much disputed since there are various possibilities for translating the Greek words behind *confidence* and *assurance*. It seems best to understand *confidence* as something like “basis for trust or conviction.” This can be thought of as a financial metaphor. The substance is like a down payment that serves to give confidence that the full amount will be forthcoming.

The word *assurance*, for its part, seems best understood as “proof” or even “demonstration.” We can’t go anywhere else in the New Testament to support this conclusion since the Greek word occurs only here. But we can go to the old Greek version of the Old Testament for support. There it occurs several times in contexts of legal argument and proof ([Job 13:6](#); [16:21](#); [23:4, 7](#)).

2. This is what the ancients were commended for.

The word *this* connects this verse logically with the previous statement. But how does it provide support for the assertion made in [Hebrews 11:1](#), just considered? *Were commended for* translates a Greek verb that means “to witness” (translated that way in [John 1:8](#)) or “to testify” to the truth of something (as in [John 5:39](#); [7:7](#); [1 John 4:14](#)). In other words, the faith of *the ancients* has been witnessed and attested.

The one who did the attesting was God. That is to say, God is the one who gave a good report as he witnessed the faithfulness of our spiritual ancestors. He is the one who validated their faith in realities that they could not see. We will see shortly why this is important.

What Do You Think?

What’s the single most important lifestyle change you will make in order to obtain what is

implied in [Hebrews 11:2?](#)

Digging Deeper

What positive impact should this have on unbelievers? on fellow believers?

B. Things Created (v. 3)

3. 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.

Speaking of “what we do not see” ([Hebrews 11:1](#), above), it is *faith* that shows us the reality of divine creation by *God’s command*. The phrase *what is seen was not made out of what was visible* is, without question, confusing to our ears. A simpler way to say this might be “so that what we see comes from what we do not see.”

What we see is not the sum total of reality! Microscopes and telescopes reveal things not visible to the naked eye. Nevertheless, those realities affect our lives. Even more, there are spiritual realities that are no less important. Even while they remain unseen with physical eyes, by our faith in the evidence recorded in Scripture we know they are there.

Some have suggested that this idea owes its origins to Platonic philosophy (see again commentary on [Hebrews 11:1](#), above). It would be better, though, to acknowledge that this is one place where that ancient line of thought and Christian teaching overlap.

II. Examples of Faith

([HEBREWS 11:4–8](#))

A. Abel (v. 4)

4. By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

The focus now shifts from the creation of the universe to particular individuals who exemplify the truth of [Romans 1:17](#): “The righteous will live by faith.” *Abel* is the first of 18 biblical figures cited by name in [Hebrews 11](#).

Abel’s better offering is mentioned as evidence that he was *righteous*, but we wonder *why* it was better. The account of the murder of Abel in [Genesis 4](#) gives very little insight. It does not say anything about Abel’s sacrifice being *better*. It does, however, seem to imply (based on what we later learn about the sacrificial system of the Law of Moses) that offerings of the firstborn animals were superior to offerings of vegetables and fruit.

Some ancient commentators also noted that [Genesis 4:5](#) seems to make a distinction

between the person and the offering in such a way as to suggest Cain's attitude was not what it ought to be. Whatever the case may be, *God spoke well of his offerings*, validating them and thereby attesting to Abel's righteousness.

But there is more. Intriguingly, mysteriously, by his faith *Abel still speaks, even though he is dead*. This calls to mind the chilling statement of [Genesis 4:10](#): "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." There is a sense that the writer of Hebrews understood Abel to still be alive in some sense. Perhaps it is in how Abel's sacrifice demonstrates as a continuing witness that "the righteous will live by faith."

What Do You Think?

What habit can you adopt to ensure that your Christian legacy speaks for you after you die?

Digging Deeper

What is your reaction to the desire not to leave a legacy as expressed in the gospel

B. Enoch (vv. 5–6)

5. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

The book of Genesis devotes only a few short sentences to *Enoch*. It was enough, though, for the writer of Hebrews (and countless other ancient Jewish writers) to see great significance in what is said there. The Genesis account notes only that Enoch "walked faithfully with God" and "then he was no more, because God took him away" ([Genesis 5:22, 24](#)). But it does not say why. The writer of Hebrews gives us a glimmer of a reason: he *pleased God* (see [Hebrews 11:6](#), next).

6. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The fact that Enoch pleased *God* has brought the writer to this general principle: *without faith it is impossible to please God*. Faith involves an approach (*anyone who comes to him*). There are two requirements of faith: the one who comes *must believe* (1) that *God exists* (see [Hebrews 11:3](#), above) and (2) that *God rewards those who earnestly seek him*.

Belief in God must go further than merely acknowledging his existence. One is called to believe also that he is ready, willing, and able to reward those who search for him. That, in turn, implies that one must believe in the power and goodness of God.

C. Noah (v. 7)

7. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

The writer has more material to draw from with regard to the next example: *Noah* (see [Genesis 6–9](#)). Of significance here is the phrase *things not yet seen*, which calls to mind the language of [Hebrews 11:1](#). Noah’s trust in *God* regarding things Noah could not yet see is indeed the essence of *faith*. That faith moved him to act. *Holy fear* here should be understood as reverence for God (example: [1 Peter 1:17](#)), not as unqualified terror or the guilt that overtakes a sinner (example: [1 John 4:18](#)).

It’s easy to imagine Noah’s neighbors laughing in condemnation as he *built an ark*. But in the end, it was Noah’s active faith that resulted in *the world* being *condemned*. Peter referred to him as a “preacher of righteousness” ([2 Peter 2:5](#)). But it would be a mistake to envision Noah pounding a pulpit or standing on a street corner yelling at passersby. It is possible that we are to understand from Peter’s declaration that Noah’s actions in building the ark (a tangible manifestation of his faith) spoke for themselves. Without his necessarily saying a word, those who saw him were exposed to its message.

On the subject of condemning *the world*, the Bible uses this phrase in three senses:

- As planet Earth in its physical sense
(examples: [Acts 17:24](#); [Romans 10:18](#))
- As the world’s human inhabitants
(examples: [Luke 2:1](#); [John 3:16](#))
- As a system of values opposed to God’s
(examples: [John 14:17](#); [Colossians 2:20](#))

All three could be in play here since the flood of Noah’s day was targeted at each (see also the [Lesson Context](#) of lesson 12).

As Noah’s decision to act in faith was in and of itself a condemnation of the darkness around him, so it is in our day. The truth of the gospel, faithfully and charitably lived out, is a testimony against sin. It is sufficient on its own to condemn the darkness that is all around us.

What Do You Think?

What step can you take this week to “preach” the positive message of the Gospel that at the same time condemns “the world”?

Digging Deeper

Who are other characters in the Bible that you can look to as examples of condemning the world without speaking hatefully?

HELLFIRE AND BRIMSTONE

“Hellfire and brimstone” was at one time considered by many Christians to be true gospel preaching. One classic example of this emphasis is Jonathan Edwards’s sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards was a New England minister who preached that famous sermon to a church in Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741.

Today, this kind of sermon is synonymous with all that critics consider to be wrong with Christianity. Within the lifetime of most of us, a shift has taken place in preaching. Without denying the doctrine of eternal punishment, preachers have found that the Christian message gains a more favorable hearing by presenting a positive message.

But the reality is that just as there is a Heaven to gain, there is a Hell to avoid. These are two sides of the same coin. As we witness to friends and neighbors, how do we communicate both realities effectively?

—C. R. B.

D. Abraham (v. 8)

8. 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.

Abraham acted on his faith (see [Hebrews 11:9–12, 17–19](#), not in our printed text), just like the others we have discussed. This critical point is repeated through these examples and those that follow ([11:20–38](#), not in our printed text).

By nature, human beings want certainty and security. Most of the time, however, we are driven by fear, insecurity, and uncertainty. The fears are so common to human experience that no examples are needed. But chief among them, though, is the fear of the unknown. So many people have been held back from achieving great things for God because of this kind of fear.

When God calls us to a task—as when he *called* Abraham to a higher mission—he calls us to trust in him and to follow his directions. We may never be called to head out to an open desert as Abraham was, but we will be called to many things that we cannot anticipate or imagine. Are you ready to trust God even when you can’t see the finish line or aren’t (yet) equipped with the resources to get there?

III. The Goal of Faith

([HEBREWS 11:13–16](#))

A. Promises Far Off (v. 13)

13. 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.

The discussion of Abraham and Sarah encompasses [Hebrews 11:8–12](#), then the inspired writer offered conclusions. *All these people were still living by faith when they died* means they remained faithful to the end of their lives. These faithful people died never having seen the fruits of their labor—the verification of their faith, in other words. All this is difficult to imagine in our impatient world that expects instant gratification and quick results.

But these *foreigners and strangers on earth* (see [1 Peter 2:11](#)) still speak in this regard even though they are long deceased. This world was not their final home (compare [Genesis 23:4](#)). They did not wander without a goal, though. They were on a pilgrimage to God.

What Do You Think?

Who can you recruit to be an accountability partner to help ensure you both live as “strangers and pilgrims” on earth?

Digging Deeper

How do [John 3:16](#); [1 Peter 2:11–12](#); and [1 John 2:15](#) further challenge you in this regard?

B. A Country Not Visible (vv. 14–15)

14–15. 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.

Faith pointed these heroes forward as they sought *a country* not yet visible to them. Homesickness for *the country they had left* would have become an obstacle to their focus on the better land, should they have yearned to go back (compare [Numbers 14:4](#); [Luke 9:62](#)).

It would have been easy for any of the fathers of Israel, given the risks and challenges they faced, to have turned back to the relative comforts of “home.” Perhaps some of them briefly entertained the idea. The writer of Hebrews was mindful of this and saw it as relevant for his audience in a spiritual sense. In the first century AD, Jewish-Christians who were on the edge of abandoning their new faith were very mindful of their “old” country, namely the Judaism in which they grew up. They saw there the promise of earthly relief from the various forms of social and economic pressures that they had faced in their decision to follow Christ.

C. A City God Prepares (v. 16)

16. 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.

Better is a key word throughout the letter to the Hebrews. Indeed, of the New Testament's 19 occurrences of the Greek word, 13 appear in this book (the other 12, translated various ways to indicate "better," are in [Hebrews 1:4](#); [8:6](#) [twice]; [6:9](#); [7:7](#), [19](#), [22](#); [9:23](#); [10:34](#); [11:35](#), [40](#); [12:24](#)). Even though these heroes of the faith could not yet see it, they acknowledged their destination's superiority by their actions.

All this was a model for the writer's original audience. If they oriented their desires toward *a heavenly* country, they would find there the true and living God—the one who *is not ashamed to be called their God, who has prepared a city for them*, a permanent place of rest (see [Hebrews 4](#)).

LOOKING FOR THE CITY

After dedicating their lives to the ministry of the gospel, my parents moved to a Christian retirement village. When Mom died a few years later, it took a lot of the "spark" out of Dad. His focus began to turn more and more toward Heaven.

One day not long before Dad was called home, my brother Paul was visiting him, as he did regularly. While they were talking, Dad suddenly pointed to the window and said, "Paul, look out there! What do you see?" Paul looked and replied, "Sky and trees." With a sparkle in his eyes that had long been absent, Dad said, "No, it's the city!"

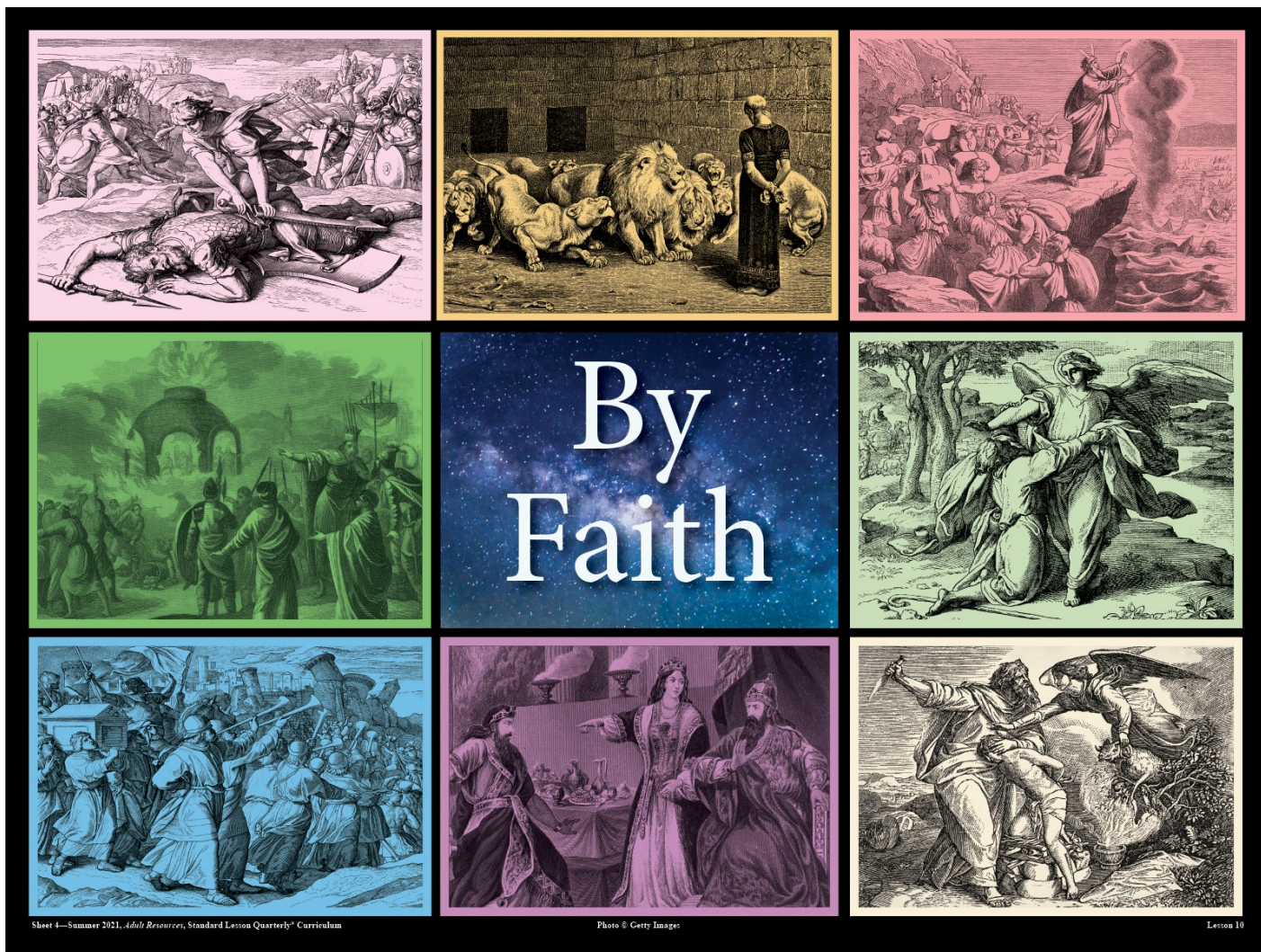
Paul and I are convinced that Dad was catching a glimpse of the better country—the heavenly city—toward which his life's pilgrimage had long been directed. Is that true of your life?

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Imitators of the Faithful

The apostle Paul wrote "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). We sometimes undervalue the role of imitation in spiritual maturity. Perhaps you don't feel confident enough to invite others to use your life as a model for their own discipleship. Wouldn't it be arrogant to do so?



Visual for Lesson 10. Have this visual posted as a backdrop as your class discusses the application of *Hebrews 11:14-16*.

Paul didn't see it that way, and neither did the other apostles (compare [1 Peter 5:3](#)). All of us can think of others—ministers, Sunday school teachers, ordinary congregants—who were influential in teaching us and molding us in the life of faith. We too are called to live in such a way that we can add our names to the list of “the righteous one[s] [who] will live by faith” ([Hebrews 10:38](#)).

What Do You Think?

Which person noted in today's text most inspires you to a lifestyle change? Why?

Digging Deeper

What role will prayer have in this change?

B. Prayer

Lord God, we come to you acknowledging our struggle to trust your promises as the distractions of life cause us to lose focus. Strengthen our faith so that we may follow you wherever you lead. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The faithful look for God's country.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Write this challenge on the board:

What is something "instant" that's not as good as the version that takes longer?

Ask participants to discuss this with one or two partners for no more than two minutes before sharing conclusions in whole-class discussion. (Anticipate that most responses will be in the food category; a secondary category is that of cleaning products.)

Make special note of anything mentioned regarding instant aspects of religion(s) or of the complete lack of responses regarding that category. Transition to Bible study by asking, "Many feel lost or abandoned when God doesn't instantly grant their requests. Let's see how the Bible addresses that topic."

Into the Word

Distribute handouts (you create) featuring a blank chart with the following three column headings:

Scripture Reference	How Faith Was Demonstrated	Ways to Imitate That Faith
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Out to the left, have printed the names Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham so that the chart has one name for each of four rows that will intersect the three columns.

Divide the class into pairs or triads and ask them to complete the chart. Assign each group one of the four names in the chart and instruct them to start there before moving to the other

names on the chart. Instruct students to leave the third column blank as you save it for the Into Life discussion later. (*Option.* Include all the names from [Hebrews 11:4–38](#) on the chart; assign different sections of the list to groups.)

Write the following questions on the board for discussion. (Write only one question at a time; do not write another question until discussion of the one before it is completed.)

- 1—How did the faith of each of these “heroes” result in something far different from instant gratification?
- 2—Are you encouraged or discouraged by their examples?
- 3—How does their experience prod us to keep faith?

Use the third question as your transition to the Into Life section.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Something Better” exercise on the activity page, which you can download. Since this can be very time-consuming, you may wish to assign discrete segments to groups. Discuss results as appropriate.

Into Life

Have participants regroup with their Bible-study partners to complete and discuss the “Ways to Imitate That Faith” column from the Into the Word segment. After several minutes, ask volunteers to share their conclusions with the class as a whole.

Distribute blank slips of paper. Ask students to write down the quality of faith they’d most like to develop personally in thought, behavior, and speech. Below that, suggest that they write a specific action step they can take to begin developing that quality.

Option 1. Time permitting, ask students to name a personal hero and model of faith. Ask volunteers to relate brief stories about them. Press for explanations regarding how their heroes demonstrated faith; write those responses on the board as they are shared. Ask the class to match the qualities in the resulting list with the qualities they have named in the Bible heroes they examined earlier. Discuss how Christians can develop each quality.

Close with prayer for learners to both *have* a hero of the faith and to *be* one.