

Experimental Faith

For by it the elders obtained a good report. —**Hebrews 11:2, KJV**

The vast possibilities of faith described in Hebrews 11, then, are derived from experimental faith. Why call it “experimental”? Because it is a word that not only implies our experience but also invites being tested at the empirical level. The marvel of faith is that it derives its strength from believing God without the evidence of things “seen” but produces works that are clearly visible to anybody who cares to observe.

The question of order is at stake in Hebrews 11:2. If we fail to see the nature of faith, as it is indicated in this profound verse, all that follows in Hebrews 11 will mean much less to us. The writer simply says that by faith these people “obtained witness” (v. 4, KJV). It is to be seen that faith produced the witness, not vice versa. The things that they did, then, are not what produced faith; what they did came as a result of their faith. Thus by believing and not seeing, a great many things happened. But their doing these things did not earn them salvation. They were not trying to earn salvation—the opposite is true—it is because they were already assured of God’s integrity and faithfulness that they accomplished what they did.

Yet, it was experimental faith, not saving faith, that produced the commendation. Saving faith is intangible; experimental faith is tangible. Hebrews 11 contains one graphic demonstration after another of what one can do experimentally if one already feels accepted by God. God motivates men by accepting them. Our wills are not set free to explore unlimited possibilities through faith until our hearts are first persuaded that God loves us. In short, saving faith must come before experimental faith.

So by saying that faith obtains a good report, our writer shows that what is at first saving faith should become an experimental faith. For the things that experimental faith demonstrates are not accomplished with a view to proving to ourselves that we are saved; we should already know that and be beyond the need for that assurance. Nevertheless, a good report gives proof that saving faith is there.

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