



Triumphant and Enduring Faith

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 11:32-40

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Winding Down This morning we are winding down one of the most important and encouraging chapters in the Letter to the Hebrews and in all of Scripture. The goal of this 11th chapter from beginning to end has been to strengthen the resolve, determination, and the fortitude of the Hebrew Christians in Rome against the familial and social persecution and pressure that was mounting against them for their faith in Christ, as well as to prepare them to face the reign of terror that was fast approaching from the Roman Emperor, a mad man named Nero. So, for that reason, we need to keep in mind that Hebrews 11 was not just a survey of the high points of Israel's history; it was essential life and death teaching for the Hebrew church.

The truth, beloved, is that faithfulness to Christ, real trust, is fragile and tenuous. Our culture, any culture, is never neutral regarding Christ and the gospel. The pressure and temptation for us to conform to the prevailing beliefs and practice of the culture may be either subtle or violent, but it is always there. It may take the form of subtle seduction, reasonable or high-sounding rationalization on one hand, or forced compulsion on the other, and anything in-between. But it is not just a pressure or temptation that comes from outside of the church. It comes from within as well. It manifests itself in worldly thoughts and actions, "justifiable" and "understandable" disobedience to Scripture, faithless and content-less religion, and apostasy from the faith within the professing church. So whether it is stealthy and covert pressure from within or subtle or wholesale persecution and opposition from the outside, the threat is always present and the battle always necessary. The pressure and temptation to fall way from faithfulness is an ever-present danger.

But rather than seeing this as a hopeless situation that leads to dismay and discouragement, the writer of Hebrews sees this as one that can and should lead to a greater and more durable, a more tested and proven faith and trust in God. The battle should lead us to a

greater pursuit of Christ, to knowing Him more intimately and trusting Him more completely, to determined obedience and greater resolve to be faithful to His truth. It should drive us to knowing, obeying and relying upon God's Word, to an absence of trust in ourselves and our perceptions and strength, and to a deeper, more profound, and more practiced and practical trust in the Lord; to a distrust of our feelings and to a life defined by faith in God. Proverbs 3 offers these words, not as something to consider, but as bedrock truth to be believed and acted upon: ***“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”*** (Proverbs 3:5–8, ESV) It is in doing this that we will be stable, steadfast, and secure and by which we will be salt and light and fulfill our calling to glorify God in the world in which we live. The Hebrew church, indeed the whole church in every generation, needed and still needs to hear the message of Hebrews 11.

The pastor is bringing this 11th chapter to a close and he does so with a dazzling rush of encouragement and exhortation to his readers by highlighting the faith of some who experienced astounding triumphs and others who by faith, conquered through committed endurance to the Lord, despite great loss. He shows us that faith does not guarantee a life of ease or comfort, but it does guarantee ultimate life and peace. So let's look at the end of chapter 11 today and start by seeing examples of

Faith Conquering Through Great Victories (32-35a) I love what the preacher says here. Preachers throughout the ages are all the same. He's got a lot more to say, but he knows that he has been going on for a while, so he says: ***“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.”*** (Hebrews 11:32–35a, ESV) The writer, here, realizes that in his examples of faith, he has only advanced to the book of Joshua. There are so many more individuals that he could name that he could go on forever, but recognizing that he has to move on, he gives a representative list from the period of the judges to the monarchy and the prophets. So he speaks of six well-known heroes of the Jewish faith, guys who had won some great victories. Why he chooses these guys and not others, we don't know. Why he places them out of order chronologically, we don't know either. Probably he

is just listing names as they come to mind. But each of these men had a story that the Hebrew Christians would have known. Let me just summarize each guy's story for us.

Gideon was the man who was used by God to lead His people to a crushing victory over Midianite invaders in Judges 7. That victory required bold faith as God reduced his army from 32,000 at the start down to just 300 men. Men who were equipped only with torches in clay jars and trumpets, by faith in God, threw a huge military force into complete confusion and routed the enemy. It's a great story. You ought to read it.

Barak, in Judges 4-5, was used by God to lead a small force against a confederated Canaanite army, a superior military machine boasting 900 sophisticated battle chariots. In faith, he advanced against this powerful army and God gave him the victory when a sudden downpour immobilized the chariots and allowed Barak's army to prevail.

Samson is the guy in Judges 11-16, who was famous for his long hair, as a result of his Nazirite vow, who waged a one-man war against the Philistines who harassed Israel. In one of the famous scenes of Scripture, having been captured by the Philistines and bound, his eyes gouged out, he was brought into the Temple of Dagon, their false god and was placed in the view of everyone between the two great pillars upon which the temple rested, so they could mock him and his God. He prayed to God, asking him to give him the strength to avenge himself against the Philistines and by the might of God, he toppled the pillars, bringing the temple down and killed 3000 Philistines at once.

Jephthah the Gileadite, in Judges 11, is another interesting story. The son of a prostitute, an unwanted child, his half-brothers cast him out of his father's house at his death so that he would have no inheritance and he became somewhat of a bandit. But Jephthah was also a mighty man of war and when the Ammonites threatened Israel, the elders of Gilead came calling and asked him to deliver them, promising to make him the head of the tribe, and he did. He crushed the Ammonites.

Then there is David. We know him well, Israel's greatest king, the writer of the Psalms. His strong reliance on God, his clear and obvious faith distinguished him, even as a young man.

We all know the story of David and Goliath, the giant and champion of the Philistine army, how Goliath mocked and laughed at the Israelite army in Valley of Elah, challenging them to a winner take all, individual battle, openly mocking the Lord. All the men of war in Israel were afraid, except for David, a youth, who armed with only a sling and five stones went out to face down the giant saying, **“You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” (1 Samuel 17:45, ESV)** You remember how David took him down with a single stone to the forehead and then cut Goliath’s head off his body using Goliath’s own sword. David is remembered for his worshipping God, his crusade against idolatry, and the expansion and security of the nation of Israel – all by faith.

And then Samuel, representative of the prophets, is mentioned. He is the guy who was the bridge from the period of the judges to the monarchy in Israel. From the story of his miraculous birth, to his calling to God’s service as a young child, to his influence in the nation, Samuel is known as a man of faith. He is the one who interceded for the nation at Mizpah when God moved to destroy the stranglehold of the Philistines over Israel. He faithfully followed the leading of the Lord to look past outward appearances to set David apart from his older and more impressive brothers to be the king after Saul. And he courageously took a stand against King Saul when Saul disobeyed God and treated the Lord with contempt in his battle with the Amalekites and took away the kingdom from Saul and pronounced God’s judgment upon him.

All these men shared in common some remarkable similarities. All of them lived in an age when faith was scarce, the minority position. During the time of the judges, it is written, **“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25, ESV)** – a sure recipe for disaster -- and that was true into the days of the monarchy. They each stood against overwhelming odds. Each stood counter to the world. And each of them, most significantly, had great flaws.

Gideon, at first was a coward. He had to be coaxed to obey God’s command to fight and later in his life he contributed to the idolatry of the nation. Barak only went into battle because a young prophetess, named Deborah, prodded him to do so. Samson won a lot of battles, but he had a weakness for foreign women and for foolishness and he wasted, for most of his life, the power that God had given to him. Jephthah thoughtlessly made an unnecessary vow to God to offer as a burnt offering the first thing that came out to meet him if he returned victoriously from battle. Sadly, it was his only daughter that came out to

meet him, and he stupidly and tragically offered to God a sacrifice that detested Him. David, famous for his victory over Goliath, for the Psalms he wrote, and for his wise, early rule of Israel, is also infamous for his adultery with Bathsheba, his attempts to cover up his sin, and his conspiracy to murder her husband, Uriah. Even Samuel, who was a great prophet and without whose ministry the nation of Israel would have fallen into disorder, was a poor father who failed miserably as a leader in his own home and had worthless sons.

Yet, in spite of these glaring flaws, God used these men because they acted in faith and trusted God in the midst of the most challenging circumstances. There are flaws in all of these men, but what is emphasized and magnified is their faith. Now that doesn't mean that we can gloss over their sins, or that sin can be shrugged off as no big deal, or that there were not and are not serious consequences for their sins. Sin is a big deal and the consequences are real and were real, even for these men of faith. But that's not the point. The writer of Hebrews mentions these men for their faith because they are all he has to choose from. Every one of us is flawed. Every one of us is capable of great faith and also of great failure, and that is just the point. What made these men great and memorable was not their sinlessness – they weren't. What made them memorable was not their strength, their resourcefulness, their perfect record of obedience, or anything exclusively about them. What makes them and their victories memorable is nothing in them, except their faith in God and in His power and steadfast faithfulness. God is the star of the story, the focus of this chapter, His unfailing faithfulness, His awesome power, His mercy and grace in time of need. Whatever these men were they received as a gift from God. It is like Paul wrote to the Corinthian church to keep them from becoming puffed up with pride, **“For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”** (1 Corinthians 4:7, ESV) It is faith in God that made these victories possible.

And then the writer gives us a list of all that faith in God alone accomplishes. He says, **“who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice** – that is, they did not just win victories but established God's righteous rule and his laws in the kingdoms they conquered, **obtained promises** – they heard God speak, trusted His words and saw His promises fulfilled, **stopped the mouths of lions** – Daniel in the lion's den, **quenched the power of fire** – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, **escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness** – isn't that the very definition of faith, **became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.** – the widow of Zarephath through the

ministry of Elijah and the Shunnamite woman through the ministry of Elisha. (**Hebrews 11:33–35a, ESV**)

These are all incredible things, monumental things, all the accomplishments of faith – things that are impossible apart from trust and faith in the Lord and in His empowering grace, His promised might. The point of all of this is that by faith God’s people can accomplish what they never could have done otherwise. The Lord works in miraculous and amazing ways and puts His great power to work in the lives of those who trust Him. As George Mueller said, “Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible. Faith begins where man’s power ends.” It is true in the outward battles that we face daily, but also the inner battles. It is faith that empowers real sanctification, real holiness. It is by faith that we can fulfill the commands of Scripture. It is by faith that we can, **“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** (Colossians 3:12–17, ESV) It is by faith that we can do these things, Christ-honoring things, and win the battle in a world that continually tries to pull us in the opposite direction. The power of faith in God is mind-boggling.

Now here’s the thing. If the writer of Hebrews were to stop here, we would be left with the impression that the life of faith is one long, unbroken string of obvious and open victories. We would be left with the impression that the life of faith is one of ease, of comfort, of insulation from hardship, and that faith always keeps us from suffering in this world. But beloved, faith is not easy and it does not always lead to measurable and quantifiable victories, to immediate and obvious fruit, to what we would see as tangible victories. We can buy into that false impression. There is a sense in which we think that faith should make everything smooth sailing. We falsely believe, and unfaithful preachers who want to line their pockets and be popular, have fed us the line that faith in Christ should make every thing easy and if it doesn’t there is something wrong with us. So often, as Christians, we can glamorize faith and create this image in our minds of conquest after conquest with no loss, no pain, no trial. But that is not reality. The truth is that the Hebrew church was not

experiencing these stellar victories, these open triumphs, as did the men and women that the preacher was using as examples. But here, the writer of Hebrews balances the record. He tells us about

Faith Conquering Through Resolute Endurance (35b-38) He says, starting in the second half of verse 35, ***“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”*** (Hebrews 11:35–38, ESV) Here’s the thing – what these people endured, we would be tempted to associate with a lack of faith. What’s wrong with them? Why do they have to go through this? If someone has to endure such hardship, we often see that as a consequence of something wrong with them, that there must be some problem. Can I tell you... that is a uniquely American perspective... one that we have exported to other countries.

In these words, the writer of Hebrews recalls those who experienced temporal suffering not temporal triumph. But – and this is so important to see – their steadfastness under trial, in great loss, in horrible persecution was itself a triumph of faith.

He recalls to mind those who were tortured, a reference to the faithful Jews during the time between the Old and New Testaments, who stood up to the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes – again, a story that the Hebrew Christians would have known. Here is what their faith led to, to Antiochus Epiphanes persecuting them by requiring them to eat pigs, which was against the Law of God, and to offer sacrifices to Greek gods. That word “tortured” speaks of being stretched over a frame and beaten until the joints were put out of place and until you died from the beating or from dismemberment. It recalls the brutal torture under Antiochus Epiphanes of a 90-year old priest named Eleazar, who refused to do such things, even being given the option of eating the meat of a clean animal while pretending it was pork, in order to be released. He refused to do it, knowing that it would weaken the faith of his fellow Jews to believe that he, at the end of his life, had committed apostasy.

Likewise, it refers to the brutal torture and murder of seven brothers during that same time – one after the other – who were made to recant their faith or endure horrific torture – scalping, mutilation, the tearing out of the tongue and roasting over flames, which took place as they were stretched out on the rack. These brothers determined, by faith, to remain loyal to the Lord so that they might “rise to a better life.” They did it to receive a resurrection better than the one mentioned at the beginning of verse 35, the resurrection to eternal life. Their faith, the God in whom they trusted, saw them through.

Mocking, flogging, imprisonment – this, nameless saints have all endured for keeping the faith, for remaining true to God. This was the cost, not of faithlessness, not of sin, not of some hidden problem, but of faithfulness to God. The faithful were stoned. Jesus said of Jerusalem, **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” (Luke 13:34, ESV)**

They were sawn in two. The evil king Manasseh killed the prophet Isaiah, as Jewish tradition holds, by ordering him to be sawn in half. How many died from the sword? John the Baptist, the Apostle James and more. These were believing, faithful men. They were destitute, mistreated, dishonored. Humanity in rebellion against God judged them to be unworthy, some of them unfit to live in this world! But, as the writer of Hebrews says, the reverse is true. It was the world that was unworthy of them! That kind of sacrifice and faithfulness is inconceivable to the man who does not know God. What about us? The truth is that we have all traded our faithfulness to God at one point or another for far, far less. And if you compromise on the small things, it won’t be long till you compromise on the big ones. Their faith made them steadfast.

Horatio Bonar rightly said, “The road to the Kingdom is not so pleasant, and comfortable, and easy, and flowery, as many dream. It is not a bright sunny avenue of palms. It is not paved (only) with triumph, though it is to end in victory. The termination is glory, honor, and immortality; but on the way, there is the thorn in the flesh, the sackcloth, and the cross. Recompense later; but labor here! Rest later; but weariness here! Joy and security later; but here endurance and watchfulness – the race, the battle, the burden, the stumbling block, and oftentimes the heavy heart.” But, beloved, in all of this we conquer through resolute and enduring faith in and faithfulness to Christ and His gospel grace. Then to tie us this all together, the writer of Hebrews speaks of

The Unity of Faith Through The Ages (39-40) He writes in verses 39 and 40, ***“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”***

(Hebrews 11:39–40, ESV) Do you see what he does here? Two things. First he makes clear that regardless of the circumstances – temporal victory or temporal suffering – each of the people he mentions were “commended through their faith. One was not greater than the other. All of them persevered by faith. That, in itself, is so encouraging to me.

But then second, the writer of Hebrews puts us in the story, right alongside the named and the unnamed people of faith throughout the ages. We share in the same triumph of faith as the saints of old, and that triumph is faith in Christ. The faith that they held in shadows and types, is the same faith that we have in the full revelation of Jesus Christ, our Savior-King. But in their faith, as real as our own, they could not receive the fullness of the promise without us. We know this, right? No one was made perfect under the Old Covenant, because Christ had not yet died. They were saved but they entered Paradise with the promise yet unfulfilled in the coming of the Messiah and the salvation that He won for the elect from every age.

They could not receive the fullness of salvation until Christ appeared. And the reason why is this: The faithful of all ages must be made perfect by God, in Christ, together. And the OT saints could not receive the promise without us. That’s his point. We are connected, all of us -- every person saved by faith in Christ -- forever. It is an incredible mystery. Leon Morris captures this perfectly when he says: “Salvation is social. It concerns the whole people of God. We can experience it only as the whole people of God. As long as the believers in the OT times were without those who are in Christ, it was impossible for them to experience the fullness of salvation. Furthermore, it is what Christ has done that opens the way into the very presence of God for them as for us. Only the work of Christ brings those of the OT times and those of the new and living way alike into the presence of God.”

Beloved, though we are one with the OT saints in this line of the faithful, we, and this embattled church of Hebrew Christians, have a great advantage over the OT saints we have studied in this chapter. They waited to see the better things that we have been given. Right now, as we walk on this earth, we have as our possession the perfect salvation in the Jesus

Christ. We have a High Priest who has descended into our weakness, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, who has been tempted in every way and who never sinned, who has won for us eternal life by the shedding of His righteous blood, who is the source of all grace and mercy that we need, who has written God's Word on our hearts, who has given us the Holy Spirit, who sits at the right hand of the Father, and prays for us. We have the blessings of those better things right now. For that reason, we have an even greater encouragement to steadfast and durable faith.

Four Conclusions So what are the conclusions that we can draw from this panorama of faith that we have before us in chapter 11. Let me give you four things.

1) What matters most is not the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but our faith in Christ. Faith in Christ does not guarantee us a string of unbroken victories in this world. Some God delivers from trouble and others he delivers through it, at different times and in different situations. God in his sovereignty may, at one time or another, place us on either side of the equation – on the side of those who conquered by faith in tangible and obvious victory or of those who conquered through resolute endurance. What matters are not the circumstances – not the blessing or the trial – but our faith by which we can conquer all our circumstances through the grace of God in Christ.

2) Faith is enough for every one of us to persevere to the end while we wait to see the full promises of God revealed. The only essential thing that any of us needs is faith in Christ. The only thing that is commended in all of the people that we have seen is a durable and dependent faith in Christ. Yes we will all stumble and fall, but what is commended in the men and women that are mentioned here is the direction of their lives – live animated by faith. You remember what the Apostle John said, **“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”** (1 John 5:4–5, ESV)

3) Times of trial especially demand faith. This was essential for the Hebrew Christians to hear and for us as well. They were tempted to fall away because of the persecution they endured for faith in Christ. It is only those who stand firm in faith who are in this honor roll of

salvation. The situations that each of them were placed in only served to try and test their faith, to show them the character and reality of their faith, to burn away the dross of self-reliance and self-direction, and to produce a faith like fine gold. Jonathan Edwards rightly said, “The Divine excellency of real Christianity is never exhibited with such advantage as when under the greatest trials; then it is that true faith appears much more precious than gold.”

4) In the final analysis, when all else is gone, when we stand alone before the God of the universe, what will matter alone is our faith in Christ. When you look at all of these people in this list, it is filled with a great deal of variety – some rich, some poor; some famous, some unnamed; some Jews, others Gentiles; some men and others women; some revered and loved, others hated and despised. What put their names and stories on this list? Only one thing – faith. The things that seem so significant to us right now – our possessions, our positions, our pride, our reputations – in the eternal scheme of things are really unimportant. What matters is faith. With faith we gain Christ and the blessings of His cross, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, a life that matters for eternity; without faith, we are left to perish with the worthless things of this world. Which will it be.

Let these words have the work in your soul for which the Holy Spirit inspired the writer of Hebrews to record them -- to strengthen the resolve, the determination, and the fortitude of your faith in Christ, now and always.

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