

Faith that Suffers and Conquers

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[0 : 0 0] Our scripture reading is from the New Testament, from Hebrews chapter 11, verses 32 to 40. And at the very beginning you're going to see in Hebrews 11, verse 32, that the author's going to say, "And remember that Hebrews is a sermon, and so he's saying something like, do we have enough time to talk about all these great people here? And so that's what he's saying to us as we begin this reading."

So let's read together, Hebrews 11, 32 to 40. Women received back their dead by resurrection. 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.

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.

This is God's holy word. Well, it's lovely to see you all this evening as we come to the end of our chapter that we've been working through for a couple of months. The end of the chapter, not quite the end of our series, because David's going to just borrow the first few words, the first few verses from chapter 12 next week as he rounds off our series. But what have we been looking at throughout the past few weeks as we've been going through Hebrews chapter 11? Well, we've started off by thinking about these Old Testament heroes of the faith who were commended by God for their faith, for their trust in him, how they lived their lives that way. And the writer's taken us chronologically. He's taken us right from the beginning of the Bible. He begins talking about Cain and Abel, the sons of the first man and woman.

And then we move to Enoch. Enoch was, you'll remember if you were here, taken by God, not seeing death, taken up. We moved on to Noah. And Noah, of course, followed God and he was saved from the mighty flood that took away the world along with his family. We saw that we moved then on to Abraham. Abraham, to whom was made incredible promises to him personally, and that through Abraham and through his seed, the whole world was going to be blessed. We moved through Abraham and his wife, Sarah, to his son, Isaac. And you'll recall, God tested Abraham's faith. And we moved on to his grandson, Jacob, and then his son, Joseph, who was taken as a slave into Egypt. And he rose up, didn't he, Joseph, with God's help.

[3 : 29] And then we're in Egypt. And we thought about Moses, who led God's people back out of Egypt, out of slavery. God took them out and to the edge of another land. And then we thought about the Israelites taking the city of Jericho as they looked for a city of their own, and how a prostitute called Rahab was saved because she put her faith in God. An extraordinary tale, a family saga that spans many generations. But you'll notice that this family is not a family of blood. There's some other people in there who are not direct lineage of Adam or Abraham or others. So this isn't a family based on who you're born to. This is a family based on who your faith is in. Now, the writer of Hebrews 11 writes by faith 19 times. And he's used by faith every time he's introduced a new historic figure or introduced the things that they became known for, renowned for. And that's really important because none of these people achieved these things that they achieved on their own strength in and of themselves.

They were able to accomplish any of these things because they lived by faith. They lived the way that they lived. They did the things that they did because they had faith in the promises that God made to them. So the writer to the Hebrews is saying to his audience the same thing that he's saying to us tonight. He's saying, I know you've had trials. I know it's difficult. I know that following Jesus is not always easy. But look how these amazing heroes of the path kept their faith in God despite the things that they went through. The good things that they went through, the hard things that they went through. Look at what they did and look forward to the fulfillment of what God has promised. So that's a recap of how we've got to where we are tonight. Tonight we're going to look at that short passage that Corey read, verses 32 to 40. And I think it divides nicely, for my purposes at least tonight, into three parts. So first of all, we're going to think about the good things that living by faith accomplished. And then we'll see the bad things that living by faith allows people to endure.

And then we'll read about the perfect reality Christians living by faith look forward to. The good, the bad, and the perfect. Okay, let's start with the good. The good living by faith accomplished. So as Corey already said, the writer begins with, what more can I say? If you've ever been to like more than one church sermon, the minister's probably said, the preacher's probably said, I can't fit all of this in. I'd love to say more about this. I just can't say it all.

And the writer to the Hebrews is saying the same thing. He's not saying I've run out of material. These are all the guys that did really well, all the people that live by faith. And I don't know what else to say. He's saying, I couldn't possibly fill the pages that I have because of the amount of incredible things that God did through people who lived by faith. So instead, what he does is he skips from giving us brief stories about the individuals to giving us a list. And he lists names Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel. And then he uses a collective term prophets, which encompasses another whole group of people. And he doesn't explain who these individuals are.

These are household names. Everyone knows. Everyone he's writing to, they know who these people are. They don't need an introduction. Maybe for us, Gideon was called by God. And he went into his town and he tore down an altar and an idol that was made to the false God. And then later on, maybe you'll remember if you've read in the book of Judges, God gives him an army of only 300 men. And he wins an incredible battle against 135,000. And then Samson, or Barak, sorry, was next. And he obeyed God's command when he was told to go and attack the mighty Canaanite army. And then Samson is the guy, maybe we know, he had incredible strength. He killed a thousand people who were oppressing his own people.

[8 : 09] He didn't even have any proper weapons. He just used whatever he had to hand. And then even at the end of his life, he relied on God to give him his strength. And he brought down a whole bunch of other enemies as he was dying. And then Jephthah, he was a mighty warrior. He won a great victory over another group of people, the Ammonites. And his victory was so impressive that he destroyed, or he had victory over 20 villages and towns and cities. David's probably the best known of all.

He was the king of Israel. He famously killed a giant. He led the people to many great victories and many great things. And then Samuel the prophet, he offered the people the words of God, offered great wisdom to Israel as they lived before God. These icons of the Old Testament, they all achieved spectacular things, supernatural victories in some cases. But the message, as we've already touched on, is not, look at how great these guys are. You should try and train like Samson did. You should study like Samuel did. The real message is, look how powerful living by faith is.

Because when we scratch a little bit further beneath the surface of each of these individuals, and the stories are all there for us in the Bible to look at, we see that these are not perfect people. They've not got super faith. When we make Gideon, he's hiding from his enemies. And he asks God over and over again, God, are you really going to do this? Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to do this? He's uncertain that God's going to come through for him. And then at the end, he ends up taking, making a kind of apron thing out of gold, which is used to worship false gods. And then if you look at Barak, so he went into battle. Yes, he did. But he would only go if the powerful prophetess Deborah would go with him. He had trusted the prophetess that he could see with his eyes more than he trusted in God. And Samson, we maybe know, did many things. He was a Nazarite people who made special vows to

God about the way that they were going to live. And he broke those vows. And he loved to show off his strength. He chased after women. Jephthah bargained with God. And it was tragic. He made a deal. He made a vow, a rash vow that ended up in the sacrifice of his own daughter, tragically. And we know David had an affair with a married woman. And not only that, but he then sent her husband right into the front of the battle, into the heat of the battle. And he told the captain of his army to withdraw so that this guy was definitely going to be killed. And then Samuel's flaws maybe don't seem so obvious. But when we read about his sons who were greedy and they were selfish, they were happy to take bribes. And he still made them judges, governors over the people. It's not to run these men down.

I'm not trying to say that these guys are not as good as we think they are. It's to demonstrate that it wasn't because of who they are that they were able to do what they did. And verse 33 of our passage explains it for us. It says, 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. So because we've worked our way through the whole chapter, we realize that the most important words in that couple of verses is not conquering kingdoms or enforcing justice. The most important words are through faith.

[12:15] These heroes are only heroes because God worked his mighty deeds through them, because they lived with faith. They lived by faith in God's promises. And I hope that's an encouragement for us as we sit here tonight. Because God's not asking us to be superheroes. He's not asking us to emulate super saints who had super faith. These were flawed people who merely trusted in God. And that means that no matter how strong you feel, no matter how weak you feel, God wants you to put your trust in him.

It means you can put your trust in God, no matter what your current circumstances are. Despite your fears, despite your weaknesses, despite your temptation to walk away from following after God, to take an easier path when things get hard. You're unlikely to face a lion on the royal mile when we get out of church tonight, or expect to take up your sword when you go to work tomorrow.

But living by faith is still the way Christians are to live today. Because living by faith is how God's kingdom breaks into the world. So it's not your own strength that's going to allow you to go into the office tomorrow and refuse to inflate the price of a job because it would make you look better to your boss.

Or it's not your own righteousness that's going to help you shut down gossip between colleagues. Or keep quiet when you hear Christians talking badly about other people in ways that's unfair.

It's not because you're exceptionally selfless that you give money to charity when you can think of a hundred ways that you could use that money yourself. No, it's because you trust in Jesus. You're enabled to live by faith. Of course, non-Christians do these things too. Lots of non-Christians do incredible good things. But history shows us that disproportionately Christians do good in the world.

[14 : 34] for the sake of others. Faith trusts in things that are unseen. But its effects are seen in the world all around us, in the lives of people who live by faith. So we get to verse 35. 35 of our passage is a bit of a hinge section, I think. And it hinges on resurrection from the dead. 35 says, women received back their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release in order that they may attain a better resurrection.

The resurrection is spoken about twice here. And I think that when the writer is talking about women receiving back their dead, we can think about a couple of occasions in the Old Testament where God's prophets were enabled to bring young men back from the dead after they had died.

And you can read about those 1 Kings, 2 Kings. But there's a New Testament scholar called Douglas Moo. And he says that we can think about these resurrections, young men who died and were brought back to life. More like resuscitations. Because they were brought back to life. And that power was supernatural from God. But these young men are going to die again. When the Hebrews writer talks about a better resurrection, the second time he says resurrection, he's talking about a resurrection that will never end. An ultimate resurrection. Being raised from a life that will be eternal.

To a life that will be eternal. The bad. So the bad things that living by faith enables Christians to endure.

I think Christians are just like everybody else. We sometimes look back. At times gone by and we say, weren't things better then? Ah, the good old days. Everything was easier. If only I lived then instead of now, I'd be a better person than I am. And after all the great names that he's just gone through, maybe the Hebrews are tempted to think the same thing. Maybe they think things were just better the way that they were. The way that they were. The way that they once were. And the writer here stops them from looking back misty-eyed and pining for a better day. Past glories. And he reminds them that while the historic church, the great heroes of the faith, are famous names for living by faith, and they achieved great things, it's also full of suffering.

[17 : 30] Verse 36 says, others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with a sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated.

And there's lots of real examples of these things happening in the Old Testament. But what more can I say? I don't have time to pick them all out tonight. But what we see here is a stark reminder that living by faith does not mean avoiding suffering. Living by faith means enduring suffering.

In chapter 10, the one before this, the writer to the Hebrews has already acknowledged that he knows that these people have endured hard times. He says, there wasn't a good old days when Christians lived in a paradise on earth, when everything was worked out, when they just had to say a prayer and God would make everything happen. In chapter 10, he says that he knows they had been publicly reproached and afflicted.

Some of them had been mistreated, seen their friends mistreated, some were put in prison, and they accepted their property being taken away. But he's reminding them that this is the case.

This has always been the way. This is the way in the Old Testament. This is the way for the Hebrews. This is the way for us. We're not to live expecting to be given and given and given everything that we need in order to make our life smooth and gentle and easy.

[19 : 12] These people that he references did not have health or wealth. They were dressed in animal skins. They're not walking about in fur coats. They're living in abject poverty.

And unlike the names which introduced the amazing winds in verses 32 to 34, the summary of these sufferings, which is in 35 to 38, it doesn't include any names at all.

We can find these things applying to people in the Bible. But the anonymity, I think, it shows that while living by faith is for the most famous people in Bible history, it's also for the exact opposite category.

the suffering, the afflicted, the mistreated, the homeless wanderers, the people on their own, without a home, complete unknown.

These people, the complete unknowns, are to live in exactly the same way as the most famous names in the Bible. They're to live by faith. And this is also reassuring for us because most of us are not famous.

[20 : 22] many of us are not going to be. But we're all sufferers. We've all either come through suffering, living through suffering, or you're going to suffer.

And to be able to endure that, we need to live by faith in God's promises. So, if you're here tonight and you're sick, or if you're here tonight and you're feeling low about your living situation, or your relationship status, or you feel embarrassed about losing your job, well, know this, that in this world, living by faith does sometimes look like losing.

Sometimes living by faith feels like we're losing. Sometimes in the eyes of the world, living by faith is losing.

But know too, that worldly riches or success are not a reflection of your faith. true faith holds on in suffering.

True faith that holds on in suffering is a guarantee that something much better is coming. Something that won't fade away. Something that lasts forever.

[21 : 55] Verse 38, the writer says, of whom the world was not worthy. He's talking about these suffering people. And he says, in the eyes of the world, these poor souls wandering around dressed in primitive animal skins in the wilderness among the animals with nothing to offer.

They're poor, they're destitute, they're mistreated because they were believed to be worthless. But the Hebrews writer is spinning this round 180 degrees.

Worthy, he says. It's the world that wasn't worthy of them. Because these people were looking forward to something far greater, far better than even the greatest comforts and riches and powers and pleasures of the world.

Okay, thirdly, and finally for tonight, the perfect. The perfect reality Christians living by faith look forward to.

So in verse 39, the writer frames this whole section of his letter that's filled with examples of what it means to live by faith. He frames it with the idea of being commended for faith.

[23 : 14] So we can see that in verse 2 at the very top of our chapter and then we see it again here in verse 39. He says, and all these being commended through faith. And then he's commending them at the beginning, he's commending them at the end.

And in between the 30 verses or so, he's established that the life of faith is a life of ups and it's a life of downs. It's a life of triumphs and it's a life of sufferings. And that living through faith, we cannot, we do not become puffed up by our achievements because it's not through our own strength that we've achieved anything.

But we don't give up in our sufferings because it's by faith that we can endure the things that we're going through. Despite our own weaknesses, we hold on to the God who always keeps his promises.

But then look at the second half of verse 39 and it says, and all these though commended for their faith did not receive what was promised. And this is a repeated statement from verse 13 so we can't miss it in this chapter.

But how can that be? How can it be that the good and the suffering who put their faith in God's promises, who endured all these things, who achieved all these things because they had faith in the promises that God made them?

[24 : 33] How can it be that they did not receive the things that were promised to them? Well, throughout their lives, Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Gideon and Barak and all the others, they all suffered and they all lived with their eyes fixed above, looking to heavenly things, looking to God as they walked through life.

And we know verse 33 says, maybe you picked it up when you read it, it says they did obtain promises. They received the fulfillment of some promises, but while they were living by looking up, they were also looking forwards because the promises that they did receive were like a down payment on the real promise, the big promise, the final promise that was to come, the ultimate promise.

Right back in the beginning, the beginning of the world, in the garden, Adam and Eve, they sinned and they broke the special relationship they had with God and the punishment that they deserved was death.

But despite mankind sinning against God so grievously, God wasn't going to leave them to die. He put them out of the garden to wander.

He dressed them in animal skins. Sounds familiar to the passage that we're in tonight. But God made a promise and he said that one day the seed of the man was going to come and he was going to crush the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to sin against God.

[26 : 11] And then we jump forward a few generations to Abraham and again God makes promises and he says he's going to bless Abraham but he also says the whole world is going to be blessed through his seed, through his offspring.

So it's with those promises in mind that the whole world is going to be blessed that we arrive at verse 40. God hasn't yet fulfilled his promises to them, to the great heroes of old and the great sufferers of old when they died because there's blessing still to come that they were looking forward to.

verse 40 says God has provided something better for us. And it's a sudden switch of talking about them to now talking about them and us together, all of us in one.

He's saying all the Old Testament saints and on the Hebrew believers, every saint of the church they're going to receive blessing together because the serpent crusher from Adam and the blessed seed of Abraham is the same one who's going to ultimately fulfill all of God's promises for them and for us.

And this is Jesus, God's own son who came to save his people, past, present and future all believers across all ages saved by the saving work of God, of Jesus on the cross.

[27 : 54] And Jesus is the better thing that's been provided. Verse 40 says that apart from us they should not be made perfect. And the way that that's phrased is interesting, it doesn't say that they would be made perfect with us, he frames it negatively to give it emphasis that they should not be made perfect without us.

So the patriarchs, the Old Testament heroes and the Old Testament sufferers, they lived by looking up for heavenly guidance but they also looked forward, looking forward to the day of the Christ when the Savior would come, the long expected Messiah.

And today we live looking up, we look for heavenly guidance from the Holy Spirit to help us as we walk through our trials and through our troubles and to give thanks to when we have good things happening in our lives that we know that we don't deserve because we're better than anybody else.

But we also look back, we look back 2,000 years to the cross when the long expected Savior came and lived and died and rose again.

they look forward to the arrival of the promise and we look back to the inauguration of the fulfillment of the ultimate promise.

[29 : 25] And Reformer John Calvin tells us how privileged we are to be in this situation right now. Compared to the people, the old people of faith, we've got incredible blessing.

He wrote, a tiny spark of light led them to heaven. But now that the sun of righteousness shines on us, how can we have any excuse not to live by faith?

They had a tiny spark of light and that's what they looked forward to. But we've got the sun of righteousness to look back on. What he has achieved on the cross.

What a blessing to have the account of Christ crucified explained and clearly delivered to us. The promise has arrived. Christ has come. He's fulfilled the law, died for the sins of the people.

He's established a new covenant and he's ascended into heaven. While the Old Testament ancestors had to live through their imagination of what the Messiah might be, we can read exactly what it was like.

[30 : 33] We can see the reality on the pages of the Bible. So while we live looking up for God's help, we look back on the fulfillment of God's promises on the cross.

But we also look forward because we look forward to the day when the promises will be made, as verse 40 tells us, perfect, fully developed, complete.

Jesus founded our faith. He sits now at the right hand of God in heaven and he's coming back. And when he does, he will finally and fully complete the promises that have already begun.

Every good thing that God has promised to his people will be fulfilled. So here's the question that we have to ask. At the end of Hebrews 11, this chapter that spans the Old Testament breaks into the new and is pivotal for us as we live our lives today.

Is the invisible realm real to you? Well, you can't see it with your eyes. Do you believe in what's described in God's word?

[31 : 58] Do you trust God's word? Like Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Gideon and Barak and all the others, they believed that God would send a Savior.

They lived as if God was sending a Savior. Savior. We live after the arrival of that Savior. We know his name. We can read about his redeeming works, the works that he performed for us.

But the question is, is that real to you? Do you know it to be true? Does the reality of Jesus make you strive after the good things of God?

Does it inspire you to pursue God? Does it inspire you to live for the good of the people around you? Because whether things are going really well right now, or whether you're really suffering, or whether you're somewhere in between, you can look forward to something better, a better resurrection, to a life that will never end, a better city that God himself has planned and built and perfected for you, a better rest when you'll be free from all the worries and fears and pains and suffering and trials and doubts and troubles and challenges that we all live through, a day when you'll come face to face with the better Adam, the better Isaac, the better Jacob, the better Moses, the better

Joseph, the better Israel, the ultimate hero of faith, Jesus Christ, because it's in him that all the promises of God will be fulfilled.

[33 : 55] Let's pray. Lord God, we ask that you would help us tonight to fix our eyes upon Jesus, the one who came and lived and died and has risen again for his people.

And Lord, we look forward to the day he will come again to judge the world. We'll separate those who live by faith and those who don't, not because of the things that we've achieved in life, but because of the achievements of the one in whom our faith is placed.

Help us, Lord, to live by faith as we journey through our lives with ups and downs, with wins and losses. Help us, Lord, to love one another, knowing that we are all living this life of faith together.

And we pray, Lord, that you would hear all our prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.