

Faith In Transition

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray. Pray, Father, that you would uphold me this morning, that I will uphold you. As you've drawn close to us, we pray that you would draw near to us now and give us such a vision of the heavenly city, that we would walk this life in the footsteps of Jesus Christ in enduring faith, to serve you, to love you, and then to be with you.

And we ask this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. Well now, if you would like to get a seat and you're standing, just find a strong person and tap them on the shoulder.

And we'll see whether they're really Christian or not, shall we? No. Well, today is a day of endings and beginnings, and sadness and gladness.

And I just want to say thank you to so many people who have prayed and worked and served and believed and laughed and wept to make this possible.

And if you would allow me a moment of personal reflection, I have been thinking about endings and beginnings much over the past few weeks, as you can imagine.

[1 : 28] And it came to me two weeks ago when I was sitting where Dan was sitting, in the midst of Dorothy Erdman's funeral. Well, it's sad that her life here with us has ended.

And my mind ran to so many funerals over the past 18 years, which were a combination of sadness but also great joy.

You know, Dorothy lived for Jesus. Her favorite phrase was, Isn't Jesus wonderful? She just wanted to be with him. And while we're sad for ourselves, she is now with Christ.

And I, my mind and my heart has been flooded with memories, particularly of these goodbyes that we've had, of children, faithful men and women, I'm not going to mention any names, who've died, died in faith, who've moved to the city of God.

And today, on this Sunday, as we move to the Ridge of Oak, which is one step on the way, I think, we choose to do something that's very odd, counter-cultural.

[2 : 48] It's a great joy and privilege to do the opposite of something safe and comfortable, but to stake ourselves on the word of God and each other.

So just as we did last week, and just as we will do next week, and all the weeks after that, so long as the Lord leaves us, we will open the Bible.

And I wonder if you would turn to Hebrews 11. I know if you have your bulletin, that's fine. If you have a Bible in front of you, turn to Hebrews 11, please. This great chapter on faith.

Now, if you weren't here last week, where were you? Sorry. I've always wanted to say that. In fact, there's a number of things I've always wanted to say.

And by the way, where's my plaque? No, no, stop. No, no, no, no. Thank you.

[3 : 55] You missed a great service last week. That's all I... We began in Hebrews. We found that the people who first received this letter had already joyfully endured the confiscation of their property.

Some of them had been imprisoned. They had been publicly humiliated for identifying with the people of God and with the scriptures. And now there was something worse on the way. And we found out that the whole danger in the book of Hebrews is shrinking back.

Keeping quiet about your faith. Being embarrassed to be too closely identified with Christ's faithful people. And we heard it's the path of destruction. Because God takes pleasure in those who endure in faith and no pleasure in those who shrink back.

And remember, the question therefore is not do you believe... have you believed once upon a time? Have you made a commitment of faith?

The question is not even are you a believer now? The question is will you be a believer in the end? And I want to look at the rest of this chapter under three headings.

[5 : 06] The first is faith and the beginning of all things. The second is faith and the end of all things. And the middle the third point I haven't figured out what to call it.

So I'm going to call it pilgrim not pie. But we'll get there. So first faith and the beginning of all things. Do you remember verse 3 last week? By faith we understand the world was created by the word of God so that what is seen was made out of things that are invisible.

And we said if you draw a circle and make this the world and you draw a circle over here and make this the word the question that verse asks us is which governs which?

Does the world govern the word or the word govern the world? Which depends on which? Which made which? Do we look to the world to understand religion or do we look at the word to understand our faith and the world?

Just imagine yourself in a university lecture asking that question. You'd be laughed at. This is basic Christian understanding.

[6 : 15] By faith we understand that the source of life and the source of meaning is not here in this world. It arises from the word of God.

That's basic Christian believing. And the reason for that is faith ties us to what is invisible and what is future. And therefore you and I our lives are full of struggle.

The world keeps pulling us back and saying this is what really matters. Give yourself to this. And the word keeps saying yes this matters.

But what matters more is that. And all of us feel this pull in our hearts the pull of the world and the pull of the word. And churches choose to be conformed to the world or conformed to the word. But faith knows that if you take away the word of God the world no longer exists. That nothing happens except the word begin it.

[7 : 14] And a church that is not governed by the word. A church that's governed by the world will die because it can offer nothing to the world. But a church that's governed by the word will find things happening that we can't explain.

This is how it was for Abraham. Just look down at verse 8 for a moment. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance and he went out not knowing where he was to go.

Faith starts with the word of God. God's word starts everything. And God's word came to Abraham and said leave. He was a wealthy man. He lived all his life in Ur of the Chaldees and God says leave.

I'm not telling you where. Just go. It will not be secure. You're going to have to leave all your prosperity behind you. And God calls him to give up what he has in his hand for something that's unknown and unfamiliar.

It's very costly for Abraham. But that is how things start in the Christian life. How they start for all of us with the call of God and the promise of God. That's why we continue to hold out the promises of God to each other and to this world so that God will create new life.

[8 : 35] Faith in the beginning of all things. Secondly, faith in the end of all things. Do you remember verse 1? Faith is based on two convictions, the invisible and the future.

And we saw in verse 6 how this worked. Without faith it's impossible to please God. Do you want to please God? It's impossible without these two convictions. For whoever would draw near to God, do you want to draw near to God?

Must believe that he exists, that's the invisible, and that he rewards those who seek him. He rewards those who seek him.

It's not that just God knows the future. It's not just that he controls the future. It's not even that he's made promises about the future. It's that his promises are good.

He promises reward. He promises happiness and joy and felicity and bliss. And actually God's word about the future comes to us in two very different ways, doesn't it?

[9 : 42] It comes as warning and it comes as promise. I mean, how did the word come to Noah? Verse 7. By faith, Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed, constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith.

The word of God came to Noah with a warning about the future and Noah staked his whole life and his whole reputation on this warning.

If you were here in the summertime, we had some great fun with the story of Noah. Do you remember interviewing Mrs. Noah? Just imagine what it was like for Noah to build his ark. Hundreds of miles from the nearest water in a place where there was almost zero rainfall. Noah's and for 120 years the New Testament tells us he took the opportunity as he was hammering away to preach.

Imagine the mocking and ridicule that he received. I mean, if you'd been there, you would have heard the mocking that we came up with.

[10:58] But you see, this is the pattern of all, all who believe. it would have been much easier for Noah just not to do anything.

To not say anything. I mean, the warning of God was so negative and judgmental. It would have offended people's feelings to tell them the warning of God.

Besides, it wasn't going to come for 120 years. But because he acted on the warning, he was saved from the wrath which came. And brothers and sisters, we believe that he shall come again in glory to judge both the quick and the dead whose kingdom shall have no end.

And just as the word of God proved true in the day of Noah, it will on the last day. Are you seeking him? Will the son of God find a faith in you when he comes?

The word of God comes even more as a promise of reward and there are some people who sneer at this whole idea of reward. They think it's somehow unworthy of God.

[12:09] C.S. Lewis was one of those when he was first a Christian and he thought appealing to our desires like that, that's somehow, that's not like the God I think of.

And then he thought about it carefully and he writes this, a very famous quote. If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what's meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

We are far too easily pleased. That's a great quote, isn't it? What's the dominant picture of the reward in Hebrews 11? It's the city, the heavenly city.

Verse 10, By faith Abraham sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land living in tents with Isaac and Jacob heirs heirs with him of the same promise.

[13:23] Why? He looked forward to the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. Verse 14, People who speak thus make it clear that they're seeking a homeland.

Or astoundingly, verse 16, As it is, they desire a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city.

Do you know that word in verse 9, sojourner, pilgrim? It's the Greek word paroichia. It's where we get parish from. Parish is made up of a whole bunch of parochias, pilgrims.

I thought you'd like to know that. We don't have a lot of time on this but do you remember when we think about the city, remember the last two chapters of the Bible, we find we're after the end of history, after Jesus Christ has judged the living and the dead, the new heavens and the new earth is a city, a holy city and it's a place where all evil, all sin, all disease, all destruction, all corruption, all decay has been removed and all unity and all joy and all the riches of the nations and all purity and harmony in life are gathered together.

and the beauty defies description. That's why symbols are used and the symbols pile up. It's so pure, for example, that the streets are made of see-through gold.

[14:58] There is no such thing. And in the centre, the centre street is actually a river, the water of life and at the centre of the river is the tree of life from the Garden of Eden.

I'll just tell you something here. Do you know the word in Greek for the tree of life? In Revelation 21-22 is the word for the cross. And there it is bearing fruit all the time.

So if the Bible begins in a garden, it ends in a city which is a garden. And it's the picture of joy and loveliness. You and me in the presence of God irradiated by his glory.

And that is why Jesus died. Hebrews 2, he died to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Or as Paul said back in Romans 8, that God's purpose before the creation of the world was that Jesus might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

What was it that motivated Abraham through his life? It wasn't Canaan. It wasn't the earthly Jerusalem. It was heaven itself. That's why verse 16, God is not ashamed to be called our God.

[16:24] He's not ashamed and I think this guy's a preacher so he's saying things negatively when he ought to be saying them positively. I know he's a preacher because of verse 32.

What more shall I say? He's run out of time. He hasn't said well. Think about that verse 16. God, God's not ashamed to be called your God.

He's proud to be called, to be named by you because we are the ones who will endure through life, through death, through judgment to heaven with him. I think that explains why there's so much emphasis in Hebrews 11 on death and dying.

verse 13, waves his arm over the first half of the chapter, these all died in faith. That's not a disappointment. They weren't disappointed. They died in faith, not having received what was promised but having seen it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged they were strangers and exiles in earth.

See, what faith does is it looks beyond death and if you live here with the conviction that God fulfills his promises, you will die that way. My experience as a pastor is that people die the way they live and if you live by faith, you will die by faith.

[17:40] Look down at verse 20, verse Isaac. He invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. There he is, he's dying, he knows God's promise will continue.

He will die, God's promise will continue. Verse 21, by faith Jacob when dying blessed each of his sons of Joseph bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

The deathbed scene is beautiful and he pulls himself up on his staff knowing that God's promise is going to continue and he bows his head and worships. He dies trusting God for the future.

And then the one scene from Joseph's life, verse 22, at the end of his life made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave direction concerning his bones. This was Pharaoh's top man in Egypt.

If he hadn't identified with the people of God, they would have buried him with full state honors.

They would have given him a pyramid for heaven's sake. But because he lived for the next world, because you either live for this world or the next world, you either identify with the people of God or not.

[18:49] He saw this was not his true home and he said, take my bones to Palestine. It took 400 years. This is what it is to desire a better country.

It's to count the main thing, our great reward. Not in terms of this world, its acceptance, its pleasures and treasures, but in terms of the city to come.

I've been reading this week about the Spanish architect, Gaudi, and his stunning, beautiful buildings. We still don't know really how he did it.

They take your breath away. The most famous of his is La Sagrada Familia, the cathedral in Barcelona, which I haven't seen with my own eyes. But he dedicated to something bigger than him, so he dedicated to God and so it's in this superhuman scale.

I think it can fit 14,000 people and it's not finished yet 100 years later. It was Gaudi's view that each architect puts a piece of himself into his buildings.

[19:54] Well, the heavenly city, we're told, is designed and crafted by God himself. In other words, God has put himself into the fabric of the city.

It's made out of him. I don't mean that in a pantheistic way, but it's made by him. He's at the center and it's dedicated to us. And that's what faith feeds on, this promise.

Very big picture, isn't it? Faith looks back to the beginning of all things. Faith looks forward to the future. And thirdly, faith in the middle, I've called it pilgrim, not pie.

And the reason I call this third point pilgrim, not pie, is because you might be thinking, what's to stop this being just a great big God delusion?

I mean, what's to stop this being pie in the sky when you die by and by? You know, come on, Dave, just, you know, hold on in this mean old world and it will get better.

[21:01] The answer to that is what it means to be a pilgrim. How do you live in this world with your heart in the next? The answer is not by settling down in a bunker hiding in safety.

Nor is it by being a tourist flitting across the surface of life easily. It's by being a pilgrim, step by step, a resident alien working here for the good of the city with a sense that you belong somewhere else.

And there's nothing passive about it. I mean, just look down verses 32 and following. Those who have faith work and pray and struggle. Verse 33, conquering kingdoms, enforcing justice, receiving

promises, stopping the mouth of lions, quenching, raging fire, etc.

Faith makes you a big time achiever. Faith makes us achievers in this world because we believe in the invisible God and the future. And there's another side to it, isn't there?

Halfway through verse 35. Some were tortured, that's an awful word, on the rack being beaten, refusing to accept release that they might rise again to a better life.

[22 : 13] Others suffered mocking and scourging, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, soaring too. You see, if the ultimate meaning of your life and the ultimate purpose of your life is not here in this world, the world around you cannot tolerate you.

Because you see, it doesn't matter how noble the cause is in this world. If you believe that there's something greater and better, you're a threat. You've got to be destroyed.

And the testimony of these martyrs is they had to make the choice to be destroyed. And I think what the writer is saying is, you kill Christians, you chuck Christians out, you try to extinguish the flame, and it's like throwing rocket fuel on it.

It just rises up and flames even higher. If you seek God, God will make demands on you and on your faith. So only as we obey do we get the benefits.

You will not be part of the heavenly city if you're not willing to make sacrifices in this life. I'm sorry, it's the way it is. We said last week, you will come to a place where you have to choose.

[23 : 28] You can't move forward as a pilgrim unless you let go of something in this life. to identify with the people of God for Moses meant his reputation.

To obey the call of God for Abraham meant he had to lose his home. This is what it is to be a pilgrim, a sojourner, living in tents. This is the experience of every Christian who believes God's word about the future.

It will put you at odds with the world. And it's very nice that the sun has just started shining, isn't it? Well, it's shining on me.

See, it's one thing for Abraham, isn't it, to be told, go from your home. It's another thing when he gets there and he finds he's still got to live by promise.

He's still a stranger in Canaan. His dress, his appearance, his accent, his lifestyle, his values, they are not determined by Canaan. They're determined by the heavenly city. He leaves everything behind in one place, not just so that he can go to another place, but so that he can have a life as a permanent pilgrim.

[24 : 44] He left home for heaven. And unless we pursue this path in life, unless our greatest hopes are beyond the pilgrimage, unless we are seeking and desiring a better city, a city with eternal foundations, we will settle down here.

Remember the exodus? It was hard. It was hard walking and walking and walking. It gets tiring in the wilderness. Goodness gracious, you know, nothing but manna and God's promise.

And so there are two temptations always for the people of God, two temptations for every church. One is to go back to Egypt, you know, to redesign your faith so it's more acceptable to Pharaoh.

Trade in the God of the burning bush, trade in the God of the water from the rock and the manna who you have to trust for the future, for the gods of Egypt who you can see and touch and feel.

Then you can have all the leeks and onions you want, you can buy the best house by the Nile, you can settle down and be absolutely indistinguishable from everyone around you.

And the other temptation is to pretend here in the wilderness that this is the promised land, we've arrived. There's a very famous well-known evangelist in the USA called Joel Austin. He does this in his book called *Your Best Life Now, Seven Steps to Living to Your Full Potential*.

[26 : 07] That's a religion of the world. It puts all its hopes in the here and now, it baptises present causes in the name of Jesus Christ and the question is how do you think that would have gone down with Noah? Your best life now make this world a better place?

The Church of the Word goes forward, serving the world, serving each other expensively because our faith is set there on the city.

This is the choice for us, this is the choice for all Christians here, to stake our lives on the promise of God, to live here in Vancouver as pilgrims, to demonstrate the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ by sometimes holding with a loose hand what's temporary for the sake of what's eternal.

Why? Why should we do this? Well, I think the best reason is Jesus. In chapter 12, 1 to 3, and as Edie read it for us, did you notice that the word endurance comes three times?

The end of verse 1, let us run with perseverance, endurance, the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[27 : 27] Consider him, do it, consider, think about him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

We endure because he endured. He endured and suffered to identify with us.

He suffered for us so that we might be with him in the heavenly city. And I know there is so much to distract us.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. And we are so weak, but he's walked this path and made it perfect. And how did he walk through this pilgrimage that God gave him?

How did he deal with such hostility? It was for the joy set before him. Joy. Again and again on the night before he died in the upper room, he talks about joy, joy, joy, that my joy might be in you, that your joy might be full.

[28 : 35] He's not thinking about the joy of dying on the cross. He's not even thinking of the joy of being reunited with the Father. He's thinking about the joy of bringing all his people to be with him as sons and daughters in glory forever.

That's what gives him joy. Opening the door of heaven. So, on this Sunday of endings and beginnings, how do we move forward in this next step in our pilgrimage?

How do we not shrink back? The answer is very straightforward. It's by faith. Faith links us to the beginning of all things because it links us to the word. Faith connects us to the future heavenly city because it connects us with God.

And faith enables us to endure as pilgrims step by step today, tomorrow, because it unites us to Jesus himself. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.