

Hebrews 11:32-40

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[0 : 00] Actually, I don't know, page 1,009, 10, something like that, 11, 10, 1,010 or so.

And so we're going to be at the very end of chapter 11. And as you look there, let's go ahead and pray together and ask for the Lord's help because clearly I need it this morning, don't I?

So let's pray. Lord, thank you. Thank you for your word that speaks to us. Thank you for your spirit that helps us to understand what you have said in your word.

And thank you for Christ, Lord, that all of this word points us to him and what you have done in him to display your glory and splendor and majesty, your goodness and your love to us.

God, I pray you would help me this morning, Lord, to speak clearly. And I pray for all of us that you would give us receptive hearts and keen minds, Lord, that you would be glorified by our time together, that you would lead us to you through your word.

[1 : 10] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. My heart was broken.

One of the joys of pastoral ministry is being involved in people's lives and seeing God at work in them. But there are times when there are burdens of pastoral ministry as well, as you see people's lives sometimes crumble around their ears.

In this particular instance, my heart was broken as I sat across the table from a young man in a coffee shop years ago. He came to me with a particular struggle in his life.

There was something that he knew that God would want him to give up, and he just didn't want to do it. He was hoping that I might say it was okay.

He was hoping that I would say, God will forgive you, or there's nothing wrong with that. But I couldn't, because it's not what the scriptures say.

[2 : 24] He was hoping that God might give him the freedom to pursue his desires and Christ at the same time. But in the end, he chose his desires over Christ.

It was conscious, it was decisive, and it was devastating. He said he didn't want to do it, but you know, in the end, he did what he really wanted to do.

I warned him that he couldn't have both. I warned him that he couldn't have both the life that he wanted and Christ.

I affirmed to him that I loved him, and that God's grace was never too far for him to turn back to him. But you know, we went away sad that day.

Both of us went away sad. Why is the life of faith so difficult?

[3 : 37] Why is it so hard to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ? You know, the book of Hebrews was written to a group of people who were wrestling with that question.

They were facing persecution. Likely, they were on the brink of or had heard about the persecution in Rome under the Emperor Nero, where grotesquely, horrifically, genocidally, the Emperor of Rome set about to eradicate Christians.

He used them as torches at his parties. People. And the people who received the letter to the Hebrews were wondering, is it worth it to keep going?

How do I keep going in the face of that? Now, my guess is that very few of us, if any of us, are facing that kind of thing.

Very few of us don't make as decisive a decision as the young man that I talked about earlier. The life of faith for us is rarely put in this grand stage with the dramatic moment where we decide or don't decide.

[5 : 01] Often our life is full of lots of little things, little disappointments where the life that we want doesn't fit with the life that God gives us.

And we wonder, is God good? Does he care? Will he provide? Sometimes it's in a crisis.

God, how could you let this happen to me or to the one that I love? But sometimes it happens in just the daily life.

Things that we cherished and longed for slip through our fingers. Hopes and dreams are dashed upon the rocks of reality. And in the midst of it, it's hard to keep going.

Believing in God. Believing that he's good. Believing that there is something good for us.

Sometimes it's not even the circumstances of our life.

[6 : 04] Sometimes it's simply the fear in our own hearts that well up. What if I lose something that I treasure? What if I have to give up something that I love? At the core of all of this thinking, there is a thought process that we rarely ever articulate, that we rarely ever would state to ourselves.

But I think it goes like this. If God is good, then following a good God ought to mean good things for us. If God loves me, he wants to give good things to me.

If he wants to give to me things that are good, and I see this thing as being good, then God must want to give me this thing. What that produces in our hearts, however, is a kind of faith that says, I will believe in God as long as I get this.

Or as long as I don't have to give up that. I will believe God if he gives me the desires of my heart. If he gives me the good things that I have set my heart on.

And again, these aren't necessarily crisis decisions. Sometimes they are, but often they're not.

Sometimes we may continue to affirm with our mouths that we believe in Jesus, that we think that the gospel really is the sweetest thing in the world.

[7 : 47] But our hearts attach themselves to other things, and slowly we are weaned from loving Christ.

If you've been a Christian here for a while, if you've walked with Christ, maybe you've felt some of these pressures. Maybe you've felt some of these tendencies. And if you're here and you're exploring Christianity and wondering, what is this all about?

Then maybe you've felt some of these fears. If I have to pursue Christ, what is it going to cost me? What do I have to give up? How can God be good if? Those are real questions that we wrestle with, isn't it?

Our passage this morning shows us a little more clearly what the life of faith is really meant to look like.

And it gives us a ringing call, a call to continue on in faith, because God has something better for us.

[8 : 55] I want you to look at your Bibles. Let's read our passage together. We're in Hebrews chapter 11. We're going to start in verse 32. And as we look there, just remind you of the flow of the last couple of chapters, so we know where we are.

Chapter 10 ended with this ringing warning. Don't give up. Don't stop pursuing this Christ. Don't count yourselves among those who, like my friend years ago, turned away decisively from Christ. But press on, because the righteous shall live by faith. And then he takes that phrase and he gives us a whole chapter of portraits of different people throughout the Old Testament and how they had lived by faith, believing in an invisible God and the reality that that invisible God defines for us about how the world really is and what is really most important and what is truly eternally valuable.

And at the end of this portrait, this series of portraits, in fact, we come to our passage this morning. So let's read it together, starting in verse 32.

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 mouth of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.

[10 : 42] 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 dens and in 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.

There are two basic ideas in this passage. First, the first one is that we are encouraged to continue on in faith. And the second is that we are encouraged to continue on in faith because God has given us something better.

[12:06] So the encouragement and the reason why, let's look at those together in order. So first, this hall of faith is meant to give us examples over and over again so that we might press on in faith just like they did.

And there are three things that I want you to see from verses 32 through 38. The first thing is that we can live by faith despite our frailty.

He begins by saying, what more can I tell you? And then he lists a bunch of names. It's kind of like, do you want me to tell you about America? Well, think of the lives of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln and FDR and JFK.

And some of you are like, huh? I don't get that. I've been brainstorming all week. What's the list that everyone's going to get? And there isn't one in this church. But what he's trying to refer to is a list of names that most of his audience would understand.

And it's meant to arise stories of heroism, of great faith in each of these men. And yet one of the remarkable things is if you go back to Judges for the first four guys and then into Samuel and David, you realize that none of these men were particularly pure or perfect in their faith.

[13:34] All of them struggled. Gideon had to be wooed out of his hiding place by the Lord. The Lord said, I'm going to do this for you. And Gideon said, really?

Can you give me a sign? And then the Lord gave him a sign. He said, actually, can you give me another one? And he was not a great man of faith. He was a coward that God overcame with his spirit to enable him to do something.

Barak wouldn't go out onto the field of battle until the prophetess went with him, even though the Lord had said, go, I will give you the victory. Samson betrayed his people and allowed himself to be seduced by a foreign woman, ended up in chains for heaven's sake.

Jephthah made a terrible vow. A terrible vow. It's a terrible story of faithlessness, of rash arrogance. Resulted in the sacrifice of his own daughter. David committed adultery and then murder to cover it up. Even Samuel raised his boys in a way that dishonored the Lord.

[14:58] None of these men are paragons of faith. And you know what? When you look back in the chapter, neither was Noah. Neither was Moses. Neither was Abraham.

I hope this is encouraging to you. Because the writer of the Hebrews wants you to see that those who are held up as examples of faith are not examples of faith because they're perfect.

It is not because they always believed perfectly. It is not because they believed so much that they are held up. But it is because they believed a little.

And their faith like a mustard seed, as Jesus refers to it, like a mustard seed, was all that God asked for them. To live in light of what they knew about God.

And to act in risky, trusting ways. And seeing God honor that. And glorify himself and use them in remarkable ways.

[16:05] Sometimes I think we read the Bible and we exempt ourselves. We think, well, this is like, you know, this is like the NBA All-Star game, you know, of the people of faith.

You know, and I'm not LeBron James. I can't dunk. I can barely dribble, you know. So, like, I don't have to emulate or try to live the kind of faith that we see in the Bible.

But you know what? That's because we haven't read our Bible carefully enough. God's grace is for every human being. And he wants, in his grace, he levels the playing field.

He says, you don't have to be great to be great in my kingdom. Because greatness is something that God bestows.

Faith is simply the act of saying, I can't do this on my own. God, I can't do anything on my own. And I need to live trusting in you.

[17:05] That is what faith means. So, that's the first point, is that we can live a life of faith despite the frailty of our own faith.

It doesn't have to be perfect. The second thing is that we can live by faith, expecting and seeing God to do extraordinary things. Look with me in verses 33 through 35a.

Do you see what they're saying? Through faith, that is, God, in response to and using people's expressions of faith, did incredible things.

Supernatural things. Extraordinary things. Things that have no human explanation. And have no credibility apart from the belief in an invisible and all-powerful God.

Think of the stories. Gideon took not 10,000 men that he started with, but 300 men and routed an army that was multiple times the size of it.

[18:18] Or if you think about King Hezekiah later, Jerusalem is surrounded by an army much larger. And they are done.

They will simply stay in Jerusalem and starve to death. But God intervenes. And the scriptures say that the Assyrian commander went home ashamed and in a shambles.

His army was ruined and in the end he himself was murdered by his own sons in a palace coup. Not because Hezekiah had done anything, but that he had trusted God in that moment.

Hezekiah is another great example. He didn't always trust God very well, but he did in that moment.

And God did extraordinary things to deliver him. The book of Daniel. If you don't know it, go read it.

They're great stories. Daniel walked by faith and God did remarkable things. He saved Daniel from a pit of lions. He saved his three men, his three friends who were thrown into a fire that was so hot that the soldiers that threw them in themselves were consumed by that fire.

[19:36] And it feels like it's a comic book. It feels like it's one of our, you know, superhero movies today that we just sort of, maybe these things have been dulled in our hearts, but God actually did this.

And he's still doing it. Friends, the God of the Bible can do whatever he wants to.

There is nothing that he cannot provide for you. There is no relationship that he cannot restore.

There is no disease that he cannot heal. There is no suffering that he does not see. There is no trial that you are facing that he cannot stop.

Simply by speaking his word. Simply by snapping his fingers. The God of the universe can do anything. And that's what this part of the passage is meant to remind us, is that you are putting your faith in the God who created everything and can do anything.

[20:50] I have a confession to make. This is hard for me. I hate to be disappointed. I live my life managing my expectations so that I won't get disappointed in life.

That's my default mode. I'm learning. I'm growing. But that's my default mode about how I work.

And it's really hard for me to believe in a God who will provide abundantly, who will provide supernaturally, who will provide spectacularly for me in my life.

Many of you know that my wife is going through a battle with cancer. I've had to wrestle with it.

Can God heal her? I mean, yes, of course he can. I just said he could. I know he can. But do I think that he will? Do I hope that he might?

It's easy for me to fall into resignation and self-preservation so I don't get disappointed. And I've been convicted of that. I've been convicted that that's not the life of faith.

[22:07] To believe God is to believe that he who raised his son from the dead is able to heal and is able to bring life where there is death.

So the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to be confident, to set our eyes on this God and to see, look, God can do anything.

But, and this is one of the most important parts of this passage, isn't it, for us. Look at verse 35 with me. It's a remarkable transition.

Verse 35, women receive back their dead by resurrection. The great enemy death is defeated. No one will ever have to die again because God can do that.

At least that's what you would think. But it doesn't crescendo towards that. In fact, he turns on a dime. Instead, he says, some were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life.

[23:26] And it goes on from there. Others suffered mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment. They were stoned.

They were sawn in two. They were killed with a sword. And so on. This probably describes the life of many of the prophets.

By tradition, Isaiah was sawn in two with a wooden saw. Which means it probably wasn't very sharp.

It's pretty gruesome. It's pretty terrible. And it's pretty hard for us to figure out how this fits with what I just told you about God.

Because God can do everything. And yet all of these died in faith. They endured great persecution. And they faced death.

[24 : 36] And God chose not to exercise the power that he has to deliver them from those trials. We're going to get to the why in a minute.

But friends, can I just blatantly put it out there for you? This is why the health and wealth gospel that is preached in parts of our country today is just foolishness. Okay?

We need, and maybe in our congregation, we need more of the point that I just gave us. We need to believe in a supernatural God who can do amazing things because he is doing it.

And you know, he's even doing it in our congregation. It may not be as spectacular, but we are seeing it happen even in our congregation. But we probably need more of that encouragement. But friends, the health and wealth gospel is just wrong.

You cannot read the Bible honestly and believe that God is going to make everyone's life more prosperous, more easy, more happy. That God is going to heal every disease and raise everyone from the dead.

[25 : 44] It's just silly when you take it to that logical extreme. And so you can't then extrapolate, you can't take it and extrapolate it back to your individual and say, Well, I don't know, God can't do it for everyone, but he's going to do it for me.

I know he will. He has to do it for me. He doesn't. He doesn't in the Bible.

He hasn't through church history. Not all diseases are healed. We bury loved ones. Some of us live with chronic pain. Not all things are provided.

We go through financial ruin. We have a deserting spouse who doesn't come back. We have children who walk away. And friends, this is in our world, here in America.

In other places, pastors are imprisoned. They are publicly exposed to ridicule. And in places, they are killed. There are churches whose buildings are burned or razed to the ground.

[26 : 49] Friends, even think of the book of Acts. Eutychius is raised from the dead, but Stephen is stoned. Paul is delivered over and over again, but he also is stoned, flogged, shipwrecked.

Go and read 1 and 2 Corinthians to see all that he suffered. God did not save him from those things. Most of the disciples, by tradition, died under persecution.

Crucified. A few weeks ago, my wife and I, celebrating our anniversary, went up to the outlet malls. Hey, that's a great celebration, right? And, you know, in the Joseph Banks store, we met a guy who was working at Joseph Banks. And he told us a story.

He found out I was a pastor, and we had a long conversation. He had been an elder and, in fact, a pastor at a church for a while.

[27 : 58] He'd also had a very lucrative job at a local company that, if I mention it, you would know it. He was doing very well in it. But one day, he had a conflict with his boss because he was in quality control, and he needed to say, this is not up to standard.

And in his integrity, he chose to do that. And he's working at Joseph Banks. He said he lost his career.

He lost all of the financial security that came with that. There's a woman I know from my time in campus ministry who moved overseas.

She longed to be married. She knew that going to the mission field was not a particularly strategic move towards finding a husband. If you don't know, the ratio is like somewhere between 3 to 1 and 5 to 1 unmarried women and unmarried men.

It's because unmarried men can't last on the mission field for the most part. They really need a wife. Anyway, that was a pastoral side note. And you know what?

[29 : 15] She lived there for the next 25 years. She served the Lord. She loved the Lord. She's now in her mid-50s. She's single. She doesn't know she'll ever get married.

You can think of stories of history. Some of the great preachers and missionary heroes, like Charles Spurgeon and David Brainerd, suffered at times from debilitating depression or other physical ailments.

Think of another woman I know from my days in campus ministry staff who's a widow. Her husband passed away with three little kids, both of them serving the Lord.

All of them lived their lives by faith, not because God saved them from these difficult circumstances. But through faith, they persevered in believing in God. We ask, how can they do this?

[30 : 35] If this is a God we're to believe in, is it worth it? Friends, there are lots of things I hope you go away with today, but I want you to hear this very clearly.

God's faithfulness is not measured by his deliverance from trials of this life. It's just not. God's faithfulness is not measured in whether he gives you the career that you want or the spouse that you want or the children that you want.

God's faithfulness is not shown because he keeps you from suffering, from feeling like you've been abandoned. Friends, his providence in our circumstances, both good and bad, are so that we might know what the writer of Hebrews in the next two verses says, that there is a better thing.

We are not called to live a life of faith as long as God takes care of us. The Bible says we are to live a life of faith because God has done something for us.

So let's look at that. Look at me in verses 39 and 40. These all, 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.

[32 : 15] You know, I don't know. I've read this chapter hundreds of times, and the first 99 times that I read this, I looked at the these all, and I thought especially of those who suffered, of the 35 through 38 list.

And I thought, these people didn't receive what was promised. But you know what? When you read it, that's not what these all encompasses. These all goes all the way back to verse 32.

In fact, I think these all goes all the way back to verse 3 of the chapter, and it encompasses the whole chapter. And it says, all of these people who walked by faith in the Old Testament, all of these people did not receive what was promised, even when they saw God do amazing things, and even when they suffered the most terrible things, neither of them received what they were longing to see and what had been promised to them.

God saw their faith, and he commended it. That is, he looked at it, and he approved of them because they continued to believe in him, even though they didn't see it.

Friends, for us to believe in God rightly is to make sure that our expectations of what we are to believe about him and from him, we have to get this right.

[33 : 47] If we get it wrong, then we will be crushed by disappointment. Noah was saved by the flood.

Abraham saw a child born when he was as good as dead, and a ram provided so that his son wouldn't be killed. Moses saw goodness.

The Red Sea parted. The army defeated. The people led by Joshua entered into the promised land, flowing with milk and honey. The king saw God deliver them again and again and again.

And yet they, these were not the things that they had fixed their hope on. These were not the things that they had believed God for.

They are, instead, in the words of C.S. Lewis, the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, the news from a country that we have never visited.

[34 : 56] These are signposts. They are tastes of something that is yet to come. And the greatest deliverance and the greatest blessings of God in this world are meant only to whet our appetite.

This is particularly true for the Old Testament believers. They were commended for their faith. They did not receive what was promised.

Verse 40, Since God has provided something better for them. Wait, look at it again. This is one of the most remarkable changes in pronouns in the whole Bible.

It isn't about them. The promise wasn't that God was going to do something for them because the writer of Hebrews isn't writing to them. And he's writing to us.

And he's writing to the church today. And remember, this whole hall of faith is meant to give portraits to encourage us to press on in faith.

[36 : 04] Why? Because God had provided something better for us that apart from us, they should not be made perfect. Friends, this is the little key to putting your Bible together.

All of the Old Testament saints looked forward. Peter says that the prophets, they looked forward to see what God was going to do because they knew that there was a greater thing coming, that God was going to bring to fulfillment all the things that he had hinted at and given signposts for and even promised that he was going to do.

The passage that we read earlier in Isaiah 61 about God coming and sending the captives free and taking ashes and making them beautiful and bringing us into everlasting joy.

All of these things are pointing forward to something that you and I now have. Because there's something better that the writer of the Hebrews is talking about is Christ. It is the work of God in Christ for us. And I want to send you all home to read chapters 1 through 10 so you remember everything that that means.

[37 : 30] Christ who is the final word of God to us so that we know what he is about in the world. Christ who was the perfect sacrifice, who alone was able to come and deal with the problem of sin that had alienated us and all of the world from God.

Christ who came and gave himself up for us, taking upon himself all the punishment for sin so that we might be forgiven, so that our rap sheet might be made clean.

Not only that our rap sheet might be made clean, but that our hearts would be made clean and made new that our consciences would be purified so that we could draw near to this holy God and not be burned up by his absolutely glorious perfection, but so that we could actually fellowship with the living God who created the heavens and the earth.

This is the Christ who created a Sabbath rest for us to enter from our vain strivings to please God on our own.

This is the Christ who is a high priest who can sympathize with us in all of our weakness and yet was without sin so that he might be the mediator between us and God and so that in him we might approach the throne of grace with confidence in our time of need and find help.

[38 : 52] This is the Christ who has, by his death on the cross and by his resurrection, defeated the powers of sin and death and promised us that one day he will make all things new.

He will punish evil. He will cleanse the world from its ugliness, from the stink and the stain of sin. He will do it in the hearts of his believers.

He will punish wrongdoers and call them to account and he will one day make all things new. And the beauty of our created world and the loveliness of music and art and culture and the love that we experience, we will see are just dry milk toast compared to the feast of what he has given us, what he has secured for us in Christ.

We are never alone. We are never abandoned. We are never ashamed. We are never condemned. We are secure in Christ. And this is something better.

This is something better than anything you will ever get in this world. And we still are called to live by faith.

[40 : 17] We don't have all of that now. Like the saints of the Old Testament who were looking forward to what God would do, we too look forward to the final consummation of it.

But we have the ability to look back and see that God has accomplished it, that he has done what he needed to do in Christ, and it's all simply working itself out.

There are no more uncertainties. There is no more doubt about what God is doing in the world. And so, friends, we have something better that allows us to live by faith.

We can press on in faith, not if God does this or does that. In fact, because we have Christ, we can face the absolutely worst circumstances in the whole world with hope and with joy and with worship to our God.

Because when we have Christ, we have something better than anything this life can give us and something greater than anything death can take away from us.

[41 : 42] So, friends, the writer of the Hebrews wants to encourage us to press on in faith because we have Christ, something better.

Don't lose heart. Don't lose sight of these things. If you, like my friend, are wrestling and battling with it, set your eyes on Christ again to see that he truly is better than anything.

And so, Hebrews 12, 1 through 3, as I close, therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author, the one who has started it, and the perfecter, the one who will bring it to completion in the end of our faith, who, for the joy set before us, before, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Press on, friends.

[43 : 18] It really is something better. Let's pray. Lord, I pray this morning, Lord, that you would encourage our hearts.

Lord, for those of us who are here and who are wavering, Lord, who are wondering if it is worth it, who struggle, God, I pray that you would help us to look to Jesus to consider him and see him as a greater treasure than all that our hearts might long for.

God, I pray that you would be gracious and patient with us, Lord. Turn us, turn our hearts back to you, we pray. God, will you show us your glory so that we might be reminded of what a great God and a great Savior you are.

Lord, help us to run the race with perseverance. Help us not to give up, Lord. Help us in the face of the little disappointments and the big crisis decisions to look to you.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. As the music team comes forward, I said it earlier, but I do mean it.

[44 : 55] If you are wrestling, go back and read Hebrews 1 through 10 sometime this week. spend some time meditating on all that God has done for us in Christ. Heed the warnings that the writer gives you in light of this great treasure of Christ that he's given us.

So, let's worship God together. Please stand with us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.