

INTRODUCTION

A pastor was hosting a men’s breakfast out in a farming community. He asked one of the older farmers to say grace before the meal. The old farmer said, “Lord, you know I hate buttermilk.” The pastor opened one eye to see where this was going. The farmer continued, “And Lord, I can’t stand the taste of lard.” Now the pastor was worried. He figured this old guy had lost it. The farmer kept praying. He said, “And Lord, I don’t really care for the taste of raw white flour.” By now the pastor was ready to interrupt the old man with a real prayer. But then the farmer prayer, “But Lord when you mix ‘em all together and bake ‘em up, I do love these fresh biscuits. So, Lord when things come up we don’t like; when life gets hard, when we don’t understand what You’re doing, we just need to relax and wait until You’re done mixin’ and probably it will be somethin’ even better than these biscuits. Amen.”

Faith is a wonderful luxury when you are facing good times. But faith is an absolute necessity when you feel like you are in the bottom of God’s mixing bowl. So today we’re going to talk about “Faith to endure tough times.”

We’ve started our visit to God’s Faith Hall of Fame in September and now we are coming to the end of Hebrews 11. We’ve read about all the big name faith heroes like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. Then in the last message we were introduced to the no-name faith heroes who experienced God’s miraculous deliverance like closing the mouths of lions, quenching the flames of fire and escaping the edge of the sword. But at this passage, there is an important pivot point: Not everyone escaped torture, arrest, and death, because God had a better resurrection for them. Then as we pick up the narrative in Hebrews 11:36, we meet a group of heroes who needed faith to endure tough times.

Hebrews 11:36–12:1. “Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised [literally “the promise”]. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

The writer has been referring to the heroes of faith as “them.” But in verse forty, he includes us. God has planned something better for US. So it’s like we’ve walked through this Faith Hall of Fame gazing at the statues of all these great heroes like Abel, Enoch, and Abraham. Then we come to a mirror and we see ourselves in this display as well.

This passage is about how WE respond to the challenges that all people of faith must face. Let’s learn three things about faith.

1. FAITH DOESN'T SHIELD US FROM SUFFERING

These heroes of faith weren't exempt from suffering. We read that, “Some faced jeers and flogging...they were put to death by the sword.” But then the writer honors them by noting, “the world was not worthy of them.” It speaks of these heroes being thrown into prison, sawn in half, and killed by the sword. They aren't named, but we know Jeremiah was thrown in a dungeon for speaking the truth. It's not in the Bible, but the Talmud contains an account of how the wicked King Manasseh threatened to kill Isaiah for speaking the truth. Isaiah fled from the wicked king and hid in a hollow tree. The Talmud states that Manasseh had a woodsman saw the tree in half while Isaiah was still inside the tree. Both John the Baptist and James, son of Zebedee were beheaded for their faith. So, faith doesn't shield us from suffering.

There is a false gospel preached in many American churches. It's called “the health and wealth gospel.” It teaches that if you just have enough faith you'll be rich and healthy. I can see why some Americans embrace this heresy, because we are so consumer-minded. But try preaching that false gospel to the Christians in Iran, Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. They are killed if they are discovered with a Bible. The health and wealth gurus ignore this whole passage because faithful people often face extreme poverty, extreme pain, and extreme persecution.

Even some Christians who don't swallow the whole health and wealth scheme actually embrace of a part of it. Many so-called Christians believe that once you start following Jesus, it will be smooth sailing. Like one person said, “It will be all honey, no bees; No work, all ease.”

I remember Ron Dunn arguing with a new Christian. This new Christian claimed now that he was following Jesus, it would mean the end of all his problems. Ron said, “Yes, it's the end of your problems—the FRONT end!”

Have you ever thought that your faith failed because God didn't answer your prayer? We're planning an outdoor event and we pray, pray, pray, and the bottom falls out—I mean it's a stump floater of a storm. When anyone ever asks me to pray for good weather at an outdoor event, I tell them I'm in sales not management.

Years ago, I was in Belize as part of a construction team to build a small house for a pastor. We had the pier and beam floor laid and were starting to frame it up. Suddenly the sky turned dark and the wind started howling. Across the way, we could see a thick sheet of rain moving our way. The guy in charge of the construction said, “Pastor, will you pray it won't rain on us?” I've got to admit I didn't have much faith, but I prayed the prayingest prayer I've ever prayed. “Dear Lord, we need to finish this house, so I'm asking if you will keep it from raining. And while I was praying these huge raindrops started pounding down on us, and we got drenched.” Maybe they thought I didn't have enough faith, or maybe as Jesus said, “God makes it rain on the just and the unjust.”

On a more serious note, I've seen the following sad scenario many times in forty years of ministry. A wife, husband, or child is lying in a hospital bed. The prognosis is they don't have long for this world. But the family is convinced if they only have enough faith, God will heal

them and raise them up. And yes, God can and has done that many times. But when their loved one dies, they are disappointed with God and their faith is devastated. Sometimes for years and years they don’t want to have anything to do with God or prayer because they felt that God let them down. Their spiritual meltdown is due to the fact that they have swallowed one of the most dangerous myths of our time—that if you only have enough faith, God will grant your wishes. And because God didn’t give them what they want, they pout. That’s superficial faith, or a superstitious faith, but it’s not a strong faith.

Peter understood that suffering was a part of following Jesus. He wrote, “For what credit is there if when you do wrong and are beaten, you endure it? But when you do what is good and suffer, if you endure it, this brings favor with God. For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:20-21 CSB)

When you follow Jesus, you need to be prepared to confront tough times. John C. Hutchinson, Jr. is a professor at Talbot Theological Seminary. He wrote a powerful statement about “Why I follow Christ.” Here are some excerpts.

“I have not seen statistical evidence that fewer Christians die of cancer than non-believers...Some of the kindest, most selfless people I’ve known have had their share of bad health.

Therefore, I will not follow Christ for promised healing.

I see no sign that Christians escape disaster and accident more often than others. I’ve helped dear friends empty muddy water out of dresser drawers after a disastrous flood. A bullet takes no detour around the body of a believer.

Therefore I will not follow Christ for any promised protection from disaster.

I haven’t noticed that Christians have stronger personalities or fewer neuroses than non-believers...I have watched Christians suffer emotional and mental disabilities and though it may seem heretical, I am not sure I would really enjoy living in the same house with either the Apostle Peter or Paul.

I will not follow Christ for any promise of personality enhancement or perfection.

For one reason alone: In Jesus we behold the face of God. He is the everlasting truth, God in the flesh. I know that in His life, death, and resurrection, I am reconciled to God, the giver of life.”

Faith isn’t a magic potion that fixes every mess. It is a spiritual roadmap that gets us to our eternal destination. The road isn’t always easy, but it is worth it in the end. Faith can’t fix all our problems but it does fix our biggest problem: SIN. Our sin has separated us from our creator, but the Bible says, “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that

whoever will believe (trust Him, place faith in Him), this person will never perish, but have eternal life.”

2. FAITH ENDURES THE PRESENT PAIN FOR THE FUTURE GLORY.

The Bible says, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (Literally THE promise.)” The word “these” refers to everyone on the list, not just these last unnamed heroes. They were ALL commended for their faith. Noah was commended for his faith. Rahab and Sarah were commended for their faith. Commended means to be honored, like when a hero receives a special commendation. This is the Bible’s way of saying that God honored their faith. It’s as if the Creator of the Universe paused to applaud each one. “Isaac, great faith! Moses, great faith!” “David, great faith. Gideon, great faith!”

They were commended even though they didn’t receive THE Promise. In the original language there is a definite article *the* Promise. This is very important for you to understand. In the Bible, God has issued promises—plural. There are many, many promises in this Book. In fact, Dr. Herbert Lockyer claims there are 8,000 promises in the Bible. But then there is the *singular* promise of God. Are you read to hear the singular promise of God? Jesus. Jesus is the Singular Promise of God. Abraham, Moses, and Rahab are in heaven because they had faith in God’s Promise to send a Messiah. They never lived long enough in a physical existence to see the fulfillment of The Promise, but they still believed it.

So all the saints who suffered then, and suffered now hold on to The Promise of God. And part of The Promise is that we will be with Jesus. And the glory of that promise is so great that the pain of this life seems minor in comparison. That’s exactly what Paul wrote. And he was a man accustomed to sickness, sorrow, and suffering. He had been stoned and left for dead. He had been shipwrecked, imprisoned, and beaten. He was very familiar with pain and in Romans 5 and Romans 8 he penned these powerful words. “And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope...For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.” (Romans 5:3-4; 8:18 CSB)

The whole reason Hebrews was written was to encourage suffering believers to continue to have faith. The writer was saying, “Don’t quit. Don’t go back to your old religion. Keep on trusting.”

Maybe I’m speaking to someone today who has been disappointed with God in the past. He didn’t answer your prayer the way you hoped He would. God still loves you. Don’t turn away from Him. Come back to Him. He is your only source of help for today and hope for tomorrow.

Five hundred years ago, Catholic Priest Martin Luther launched a discussion that led to the Protestant Reformation. He was tried and found guilty of heresy and was excommunicated from the church. Then the secular government declared him guilty of treason, and banned him from the country. All his possessions and books were gathered and burned. Luther survived

because of the kindness of German believers. So now you should know some of the background behind the words of His famous Hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” He wrote: “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever.” The suffering of this life is temporary—but the glory that we shall experience is forever and ever and ever.

3. THE FAITH HALL OF FAME WON’T BE COMPLETE UNTIL WE JOIN THEM!

Verse forty says, “God had planned something better for us (there we are again) so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

God has planned something better for us. What is the better thing? The Old Testament saints were saved by looking forward to the Promise of a Messiah to deliver God’s people. They didn’t even know His name. But we have something better; we know His name is Jesus! We can look back to the Cross and know that Jesus is the Promised One. We can look within to the indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus and know that Jesus is God’s Promise today. That’s much, more better!

Hebrews is all about what we have is better than what they had in the Old Testament. In Chapter 1 Jesus is better than the Angels. In Chapter 2 Jesus is better than the prophets. In Chapter 3 Jesus is better than Moses. In Chapter 4 Jesus gives us a better Sabbath. In Chapter 5 Jesus is better than the High Priest. IN Chapter 6 Jesus is better than Abraham. In Chapter 7 Jesus is better than Melchizedek. In Chapter 8 Jesus brought a better covenant. IN Chapter 9 Jesus is a better sacrifice. In Chapter 10 Jesus gives us a better security.

And here in the Faith Chapter, They were looking for a better country, God promised them a better resurrection, and here he planned something better for us! In fact, when you study Hebrews, you learn that everything about Jesus is _____. You’d better write it down, everything is better, better, better with Jesus Christ! You’d better believe it! Wow, I feel better.

But the next amazing statement in verse forty is that all of these heroes of faith are waiting. They are waiting on us. Because the Bible says in some way, they won’t be completed until we get finish our race and join them there. They have finished their races. We’re still in ours. This is the focus of our next two messages: “Therefore, since we also have such a large crowd of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our EYES ON JESUS...” (Hebrews 12:1-2 CSB)

So why is it that Abraham, Martin Luther, and John the Apostle are waiting for us? It’s almost like a family standing around a Thanksgiving table. The food has all been laid out. But there is one family of four who are running late and they haven’t made it to the table yet. The grown son calls and the grandfather and says, “We’re on our way. We got delayed by traffic, but we’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. The grandfather says, “Take your time, son. We aren’t going to start the meal without you.” And the full excitement of the Thanksgiving feast is not complete until the full family arrives.

There’s going to be a great wedding feast in heaven and many of the guests have already arrived, but the party won’t be complete until all the people of faith are there.

The Great British pastor Charles Spurgeon explained it in terms of us joining the heavenly choir. “THEY are waiting up yonder for us; the choirs of heaven cannot be completed without you and me. Heaven’s full complement, the perfect number of the divine family of love, can never be made up till we who have believed go up yonder to join all those who have had like precious faith. By God’s grace, we shall all be there that they with us may be made perfect.”

CONCLUSION

God has a better country prepared for all of us. It’s a place called Heaven. Even if you have faith, you will suffer, but this suffering is nothing compared to the glory of Heaven.

It was almost sixty-two years ago when five missionaries were killed by the Huaorani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. The missionaries had established contact and were giving gifts to the members of the tribe. For some reason the tribe turned on the missionaries and killed them with spears and machetes. The news so captivated our nation that it was front-page news and on the cover of *Life Magazine*.

Nate Saint was the pilot of the little airplane that ferried the missionaries to the riverbed where they died. His son, Steve Saint, has spent much of his life living among the Huaorani, who are all Christians today. He discovered while talking with one of the men who killed his father, that all five missionaries had pistols. They could have defended themselves, but the pistols were unfired. Steve Saint said at first he was troubled thinking, “The didn’t have to die.” And then he realized the reason the missionaries didn’t shoot those attacking them was because they knew they if they were killed by the natives, they would go to heaven. But if they shot and killed one of the natives, he wouldn’t go to heaven. So they were faced with a tough choice. But their faith empowered them to endure violent deaths so that those killing them could someday hear the good news about Jesus. They were ready to die for Jesus.

One of the missionaries was Jim Elliot who once wrote in his diary, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” That’s faith—and those five missionaries are in God’s Faith Hall of Fame just like all of us who trust God.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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