

A Better Reward

Hebrews 11:1-40

How do you motivate people to do hard things? To stick with something when it's difficult, when the odds are against them, when they're not very close to being finished and they just want to quit?

One tried and true tactic is to tell stories. The coach gathers his players around him in the locker room before the game, to tell them about the 2004 Red Sox, and how they were down by three games in the playoffs, only to pull together and come back to win the next four games against the Yankees and go on to win the World Series for the first time in 86 years.

The classroom guest tells the students about her experiences as an African American woman during Segregation, how she wasn't allowed to drink from the same bubbler as white people, or use the same bathroom, or attend the same schools, or churches, but how the black community came together at great personal cost—being yelled at, spit at, harassed, arrested, some of them lynched—in order to stand against 200 years of oppression and see the country begin to change.

The missions class assigns everyone to read the biography of Adoniram and Ann Judson—how they willingly subjected themselves “to the hardships and sufferings of missionary life; . . . to . . . exposure to the dangers of the ocean, to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps a violent death. . . all . . . for the sake of him who left his heavenly home, and died for [us]; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion, and the glory of God.”¹

One of the ways we motivate people to do hard things, against all odds, in the face of opposition, with no guaranteed result in sight, is to tell stories. Stories of others who've gone before us, who have faced similar or greater trials, and how they persevered *through* uncertainty, *through* opposition and danger, that we might do the same.

And that's what we have before us in what is without doubt the most famous chapter of Hebrews—the “great cloud of witnesses” in chapter 11. As we've noted throughout the series the author's aim through this entire book has been to help God's people finish well. To hold fast to the gospel and their faith in Jesus all the way to the end, despite opposition and temptation. In the first section of the book he sought to convince us that there is nothing better to hold onto—nothing better than Jesus. Now in these final chapters he's showing us what it look like to hold onto to Jesus, what will it take to finish well.

As we saw last week, it looks like putting our confidence into action. Since we have confidence that Jesus is better—that in him, and only in him, we have access to God and an advocate in heaven—we need to draw near to God, hold fast to the gospel, and stir up one another to love and good works (10:19-39). Put our confidence into action.

¹ Adoniram Judson, in his letter to Ann's father, requesting her hand in marriage. As cited in Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1987), 83.

But that's not always easy. Especially when the road is long, and hard, and there are all sorts of people trying to lead us astray, and the end seems nowhere in sight. And so he ended chapter 10 by emphasizing the necessity of *persevering faith*. He quotes Habakkuk 2:3-4, how "the righteous shall live by faith" and reminds them that "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (10:39). And this is the topic he now elaborates on for an entire chapter—the necessity, the difficulty, and the fuel of persevering faith.

And he does so, largely, by telling a story. Or rather, a whole thread of stories. Stories about the necessity, the difficulty, and the fuel of persevering faith, to encourage us to finish well with Christ. We'll start in vv. 1-7 with the *necessity* of persevering faith.

The Necessity of Persevering Faith (11:1-7)

What makes faith so necessary for finishing well? The author begins by describing the nature of faith, specifically as it relates to hope, assurance, and conviction.

It's easy to hope for something. Or to imagine an outcome that you don't yet see. It's a lot harder for that hope or unseen outcome to be little more than wishful thinking. You need *assurance* of that hope, and *conviction* of that unseen outcome, if you're really going to be motivated to pursue it. For instance, we're coming up to the final weeks of the school year, with all the year-end projects and final exams. It's easy to hope for a good grade on a final test, or to imagine an A+. But if lack assurance that I could actually do well on the test, or I if lack conviction that the test actually matters or is worth it, then it's hard to be motivated to study. If it's impossible for me to better than a D, or if this test is just filling time till summer, then hoping for an A is just wishful thinking. There's no assurance or conviction.

In the same way, if you're going to persevere and finish well in your pursuit of Christ, you need more than imagination and wishful thinking. You need assurance and conviction—assurance of things hoped for, and conviction of things not seen. And according to Hebrews, *faith* is that assurance and conviction (11:1). It takes that hope and that unseen outcome and anchors them to God himself.

But what do we mean by "faith" here? When the author of Hebrews talks about the necessity of faith, he's not talking about faith the generic terms we often encounter today—that it's nice to have some sort of faith, or that your faith important to you. He's talking about a very specific faith—the faith he's been holding out and trying to convince us of throughout the entire book—faith in the God who has revealed himself to us and accomplished salvation for us in his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because faith is only as good as the object you invest it in. Faith in something that's not really true does you no good, no matter how truly or strongly you believe it. I might believe with all my heart that if I flap my arms fast enough I can fly, but that faith will not keep me from breaking my neck if I were to jump off a roof and try. So the real power of faith doesn't come from the one who has the faith; it's contingent on whatever or whoever we're placing our faith in. Faith in God gives us assurance of what we hope for and conviction of what we can't see, because you don't have to see the outcome for yourself if you know that God is in control of it. You simply have to trust him.

And that's the nature of faith—trusting God for what you cannot see. As he illustrates in v. 3, “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” There's an unseen component. That doesn't mean it's a blind faith, or there's no evidence. There's evidence of God everywhere you look in creation (cf. Rom. 1:18-22). All this had to come from somewhere. The massive expanse of the universe, the intricacy of protons and electrons, how it all works together to support life—that doesn't just happen. It happens through God's Word. And we know that by faith. Trusting God with what we cannot see.

Because *he* can see it. He's in control of it. He has the power to answer it. And a reputation I can trust. He's my anchor, my assurance, my conviction.

And those who placed their faith in God in the past were commended for it (11:2). Faith is the mark of the faithful, of those who finish well. And it's the means of their commendation. By faith, Abel's worship was acceptable to God, and he was commended as righteous (v. 4). By faith, Enoch was delivered from death, and he was commended as having pleased God (v. 5). By faith, Noah obeyed God when it didn't make sense, and was commended as righteous, even while his faith condemned the world (v. 7). Each one had assurance of what they hoped for and conviction of what they could not see—confidence in a promised outcome—through their faith in God.

And it's actually impossible to please God without faith. That's what he tells us in v. 6: “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” And there's two things we see that we must believe here, if faith is going to anchor our hope and conviction. First, we must believe that God exists, or that God *is*—that he really is there, and that he is who he reveals himself to be. And second, that God rewards those who seek him. That our pursuit of God is not in vain. That there is an inheritance waiting for us, a divine rest, an unshakable kingdom, and incomparable reward. We're going to come back to that last part a little bit later.

Faith is utterly necessary for finishing well—faith specifically in God himself. Without it, any hope we have, any musings about our inheritance or reward, is wishful thinking.

But just because faith is necessary, doesn't mean our pursuit will be easy. And that's what most of this chapter is about—the difficulty of persevering faith.

The Difficulty of Persevering Faith (11:7-12, 17-38)

In vv. 8-38 we find a thread of short stories, each one illustrating the nature and necessity of faith for finishing well, especially when it's hard and the prize is far off. In vv. 8-22 we find the faith of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants; in vv. 23-31 we find the faith of Moses and those entering the land; and in vv. 32-38 we have the faith of judges, kings, and prophets. And we could really spend weeks reflecting on each specific story and the encouragement it provides. But we can also identify three general situations among these stories—situations common among those who have gone before us, and still common among those who seek God today—in which faith is utterly crucial: facing unknown results, impossible promises, and certain danger.

Faith in the Face of Unknown Results

At some point in everyone's pursuit of God, you're going to come to a place where you're called to move forward without any clear picture of what's ahead. To follow God in the face of unknown results. Answering a call to missions. Taking a new job. Staying put in what feels like a dead-end job. Starting a family. Doing foster care. Starting a spiritual conversation with your neighbor. We may be very convinced of God's call in these situations, but entirely unclear of where it will take us, or what the results will be like. Which is scary. Because we like to know where we're going. And not knowing means that we're not in control.

But consider the story of Abraham and his faith in the face of unknown results. We're told two stories here, the first about his call in Genesis 12 to leave the land he knew and the people he knew and go to a place God would show him (11:8-9). I don't even like to put the car in gear until I know each step of the directions; to be told to get in the car and just drive, and I'll tell you as you go—nope. Not how I want to do it.

But Abraham goes. He *obeys*. By faith, "he went out, *not knowing* where he was going" (v. 8). And God was faithful. We know the end of the story. If God was faithful to him amid unknown results, can't we trust him to be faithful to us too?

The second story is harder than the first in my opinion. Verses 17-19, God tests Abraham and asks him to offer up Isaac, his only son, the one through whom God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and bless all nations of the earth—God asks him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Now it was a test—he never meant for him to do it. It literally makes zero sense. You promised to bless me through Isaac, you miraculously brought him into this earth, now you want me to take him out? That makes no sense at all.

Just like it might not make sense to leave a thriving job at the height of a flourishing career to enter the mission field. You worked so hard to get to where you are; why would God call you to leave it? Or to move your kids out of a top-rated school system, in order to be part of a church plant in an underprivileged area. But Abraham obeys. Faced with two seemingly incompatible words from God—that Isaac will become a great nation, and that he is to kill Isaac—Abraham reasons that God must be planning to raise him from the dead. So he obeys in the face of unthinkable, unknown results. And God honors his faith. He preserves Isaac and fulfills his promise, because Abraham trusted God (cf. Gen. 22:15-18). Similarly, Isaac, without any ability to actually see the future, passes the promise of God on to Jacob, and Jacob to Joseph and his sons, and Joseph to the future generations of Israel (Heb. 11:20-22). Faith amid unknown results.

Faith in the Face of Impossible Promises

A second common scenario among these stories is faith in the face of impossible promises. God says to Sarah in her old age that she's going to bear a son. He tells the people of Israel to march into the Red Sea and walk across it on dry ground. And then to march around the city of Jericho seven times, and God will give it into your hands. That's impossible. All of it. It can't happen—not in any worldly or naturalistic sense.

And yet "by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised" (11:11). "By faith the people crossed the

Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days” (11:29-30). God promised the impossible, and by faith, they saw him do it.

Are we willing to trust God in the face of impossible promises today? Promises like, this will end well (cf. Rom. 8:28-30). For the Christian, wherever you are, whatever you’re facing, no matter how deep your hurt or discouragement or frustration—*this will end well*. For many of us, that feels impossible. How can what I’ve endured, what I’m still enduring, turn out in any way, shape, or form for good?

Or the promise that there is a way out. A way out of sin and temptation. God promises to provide it (cf. 1 Cor. 10:13). But that can seem impossible. I’m in too deep. I want it too much. I’m trapped by others who keep pulling me in. There’s no way I’ll ever be free from this sin—it’s impossible.

But if Sarah could trust God to provide a son post-menopause, if Israel could trust God to part the Red Sea, or to crumple the walls of Jericho without their lifting a finger, can we not also trust him for the impossible? Redeem a life of disappointment? Freeing us from sin? Healing what doctors say can’t be healed? Raising the dead spiritually?—that’s impossible. Dead people don’t live again. With God nothing is impossible. We have to believe.

Faith in the Face of Certain Danger

The third situation that comes up again and again in the stories of Hebrews 11 is one of the most common, and that’s faith in the face of certain danger.

Following Jesus is not safe. Somehow we’ve lost that simple fact in American Christianity. We’ve allowed ourselves to highjack the American Dream, baptize it, and pass it off as God’s plan for his people. His promise of abundant life. But following Jesus has never been safe. Think about it—how did the world treat our king? They mocked him. They ignored him. They accused him of having a demon. They twisted their own justice system to condemn him. They arrested him, beat him, spit on him, and crucified him.

And Jesus says, “A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:20). That’s not very safe. And so it is, we will face dangers even today. We will be misunderstood and dismissed. All you Christians think you’re better than everyone else. Actually, we think we’re about as bad as it gets. But there’s a Savior who loves us. But as long as that Savior refuses to change his standard of morality and holiness, his people will be misunderstood and dismissed. Mocked and condemned. Passed over for a job because of what you believe or the church you attend. Pressured to conform to the world’s standards, or be punished. It was not long ago that the Mayor of Boston vowed never to let Chick-Fil-A open in the city because the owners believe what the Bible teaches about marriage.² Serving communities, providing jobs, offering delicious-tasting food—none of that matters if you’re on the wrong side of morality. Following Jesus is not safe.

² “[Boston Mayor’s Letter To Chick-Fil-A President: Anti-Gay Stance Is ‘Insult’ To City](#),” *Huffington Post*, July 25, 2012. But see his clarification, “[Boston’s Mayor Menino clarifies Chick-fil-A stance](#),” *Boston Globe*, July 27, 2012.

And amid those dangers, we will be tempted to look for heroes on earth who can protect us. Those we can see with our own eyes and know that they're there, promising to use their power to protect us, if we just throw our allegiance in with them. After centuries of being the privileged faith in America, and now watching that slip away, it's tempting to want to look to people with power who can make Christianity safe again, even if it costs us our actual Christian witness. Just one example: white evangelicals in America are currently the least likely demographic to approve of welcoming refugees in the U.S.³ Think about that. *No other demographic in the country has a lower view of welcoming the stranger than white evangelicals!* And it's not like this is just politics; the Bible commands us to love our neighbors, to love the stranger and foreigner among us, for we were once strangers too, and still are as we look to our heavenly home (Matt. 22:35-40; Lk. 10:25-37; Deut. 10:18-19; Heb. 11:13). So why are so many so ready to align themselves with political powers and policies that stand in contradiction to our faith? Fear, and the promise of safety.

But what God calls us to is *faith*—faith that refuses to give way to fear and instead trusts God for what we cannot see. A faith like that of Moses' parents, who by faith were not afraid of the king's edict and hid their child (11:23). (11:23). A faith like Moses, who refused to remain safe by aligning himself with those in power, but instead chose to be mistreated with his people (11:24-25). A faith like the judges, kings, and prophets who by faith experienced victory in the face of danger—they “conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions [like Samson, David, and Daniel], quenched the power of fire [like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego], escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection [like the widow of Zarephath]” (11:33-35a). And who by faith endure great suffering in the face of danger—“Some were tortured . . . 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” (11:35a-38).

So what fuels this kind of faith? We see that faith is utterly necessary if we're going to finish well, but how do you not give up in the face of unknown results, impossible promises, and certain danger?

The Fuel for Persevering Faith (11:10, 13-16, 26, 39-40)

That brings us to our third and final point, the fuel of persevering faith, and full circle back to what we read in v. 6: “whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that *he rewards those who seek him.*”

What could fuel men and women, in the face of great opposition, surrounded by danger, filled with uncertainty, to press on and not give up, even with the end nowhere in sight? According to Hebrews 11, it's the promise of a better reward.

³ Philip Bump, “[The group least likely to think the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees? Evangelicals.](#)” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2018.

We see this sprinkled throughout these great stories—that what fueled the persevering faith of these saints was the better reward that they were looking forward to. Why did Abraham trust God and depart from a land he knew to a place he didn't know? Verse 10: “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” And the author clarifies what he means by that in vv. 14-16: “For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

In Jesus we have a better reward. A better country—a heavenly kingdom that nothing in this world can compare to. There is coming a day when there will be no more uncertainty. No more danger. No longer anything to fear. No more tears, no more sadness, no more hunger, or fighting, or sin or evil. A day when our bodies will no longer be subject to decay, disease, or death, but they will be raised like Jesus' glorious body and we will truly and perfectly bear the glorious image of our Maker (Phil. 3:20-21; Rev. 21:3-4). A day when all God's impossible promises will finally and forever be true. When the home that we've been longing for and dreaming about our whole lives, though we've never even seen it, will be ours forever. A new creation wherein righteousness dwells, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, because heaven and earth will have become one (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). And at the center of it all will be God our Savior, and there will be *nothing* standing in our way; no temple, no curtain, hidden heavenly veil. Unmediated, intimate, unending access to God. Forever (Rev. 21).

As we've said several times throughout this series, if we have Jesus, there is nothing this world can offer, and nothing this world can take away, that can compare to the inheritance we look forward to in Christ.

Such was Abraham's motivation—a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. Such was Moses' motivation. Why was he so willing to refuse the safety of Pharaoh's household and be mistreated with God's people? Verse 26: “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.” He treasured Christ above all things. We have a better reward in Jesus—even Moses knew that by faith (though it was no doubt less clear than for we who stand on this side of the cross and resurrection).

And here's the most remarkable part of these great stories of faith—what we're told in v. 13: “These all died in faith, *not having received the things promised*, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” They recognized, amid the trials, amid the fear, amid the unknown, that the reward doesn't come in this life. They believed in it, and greeted it from afar, and set themselves to following Christ *knowing* that they would finish their race before the trophy was awarded.

The author reiterates this remarkable fact in the closing verses of the chapter, but then he also explains why these saints of old are still waiting. Verse 39: “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” (11:39-40).

Think about that. This cloud of witness, these great examples who encourage us to run with perseverance the race marked out for us, though their race is done, they're still waiting for the prize—the glorification, the resurrection, the new creation, the consummation of all things—because God has chosen to glorify us alongside of them. On the day when Moses and Sarah and Abraham receive their crowns, we'll be standing alongside them receiving ours—along with all who belong to Jesus.

In Jesus we have a better reward. And finishing well requires us to believe that—so that even when it's hard, when it doesn't make any sense or feel like we're going anywhere, we know that we're working with more than wishful thinking. We have assurance of our hope, and conviction of what we cannot see, because we have faith. Faith in God through Jesus. Faith to persevere, and hold onto Christ, knowing that he is holding onto us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. Describe a time in your life where you did something hard that you never would have done if it weren't for the example of someone who went before you.

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. In terms of context, what has the author talked about in previous passages that help us understand what he's talking about now? (Look especially at the conclusion of ch. 10)
3. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
4. How does the author define faith in this chapter? How does that compare with other common definitions (either in the church or in the world)?
5. As you survey the stories told in this chapter,
 - a. What situations do people find themselves in?
 - b. What are people believing or trusting God for in those various situations?
 - c. What are some of the results of faith?
6. How would you summarize the main point of this chapter?

Questions for Reflection and Application

7. What promises of God are you having a hard time believing right now?
8. Which story do you find most encouraging or convicting in this chapter?