

The Good Times & Bad Times of Faith

Hebrews 11:32-40

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, May 14, 2023

Well, as many of you know, it's been quite a week for our church. When you're a body of Christ and a family and a household of God and all these things you're supposed to be, you often get to see blessings and wonderful things and high points and mountaintops, which is what we all love in the ministry; I got into ministry for that. I like to see the joys of that happening in your lives. But there's other weeks where you're overcome with sorrow. And everything is pits, and everything is valleys, and everything is low moments in life. And it's been kind of like that this week at Grace Fellowship. If you've watched some of the emails coming through and just been kind of aware of what's going on, we've had several people that have had some very difficult times. I got back from the hospital actually just on the way here to church visiting Vicki Beasley. She broke her femur in her leg. Richard was talking about that earlier. She was on Mount Thom several hundred feet up, and as she was coming down, her dog jerked, and her leg stayed put and broke. And they brought her down. A rescue team brought her down some time afterwards. He's waiting on surgery. But that wasn't the only sad thing that's happened this week. Many of you are aware that Nancy Dash lost her husband unexpectedly. And how do you get over something like that? We've had other families that have had to go to the hospital. Some other ones have had other sorrows occur as well. And I think in times like that, it always makes you ask the question, why? Why would God allow this? And just in light of that, I wanted to read something to you. This is from Randy Alcorn, a book that he wrote on suffering and I think it sums this up very well. This is what we're talking about this morning by the way, this is the topic of our sermon. I did not plan on that; the Lord just sovereignly ordained that. But he said this. He said,

A Barna poll was once raised to ask the question, if you could ask God one thing, and you knew He would answer, what would it be? The most common response was "Why is there pain and suffering in the world?" He said this is very important because you won't get very far in a conversation with someone who rejects the Christian faith before they bring up the problem of evil. Pull it out like a trump card; it's supposed to silence believers and prove that an all good God does not exist. Atheists write page after page about evil and suffering. They even bring it up at times when the chapter is not discussing this subject. Some atheists will even admit that there might be a God who created the earth; the problem they have is that they believe He created it, and then left it because this planet seems so god-forsaken to them. This is something every Christian has to wrestle with. Suffering and evil are things that exert a force that either push us from God or pull us to Him. Unfortunately, many churches, whether traditional, liturgical or otherwise have failed to teach people about the topic.

One pastor's daughter told me that, "I was never taught the Christian life would be hard. But I've discovered it is and I'm not ready." Our failure to teach a biblical theology of suffering leaves Christians unprepared for harsh reality. It leaves our children vulnerable to history, philosophy,

and studies classes that raise the problem of evil while denying the Christian worldview. Since the question is always raised, we have to train them up in it because the Bible promises that all who know God will suffer. They'll feel trials and tribulations. They'll know what Paul talked about when he said, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh and a messenger to torment me. And three times I asked the Lord to take it away, but he didn't." At the same time, though, the Bible also promises that all who suffer will fall into the hands of a gracious loving God who is the answer to the problem of evil and suffering. Furthermore, when you look at Jesus, His incarnation and death and redemption that it provides, that should silence the argument that God has not dealt with the problem of suffering. He is the perfect solution to it, amen? God doesn't merely empathize with our suffering. He suffers with us. Jesus is God. So that what He went through, God went through, and He went to the cross to end our suffering once and for all.

Isn't that well said? I really enjoyed reading that this week. I never make a trip to the hospital when I don't ask God 'why?'. I never preach at a funeral when I don't wrestle with this whole issue of His sovereignty in this. Where's the goodness in this? Why is this person that I love going through this? What's going on in eternity? But every time I wrestle with that question, I always go back to the cross. Because the cross reminds me that God cares. He cares deeply about the things that happen in this world. We always need to remember that. And that's what we're going to talk about this morning. Let me actually pray before we get into it because I need God's help to deal with this subject with you.

Heavenly Father, as we think about these issues in life, these massive, massive issues that have been talked about since the foundation of the world. Father, we need Your help. Our people have had a week of all weeks and it breaks our heart and it makes us fall on our faces, but we know Lord, that's where You want us to be. You want us to call out to You for help in this. But Father, we always want to approach these things with the proper spirit. This is not just an academic discussion when we talk about suffering and evil, this is a personal one. If we're not suffering now, we're going to be; and if we're not in a trial at this moment, it's coming. So Father, I pray that as I preach this, as we study Your Word, as we wrestle with these things, Father, would You penetrate our hearts with the Bible, with the Scriptures with Your word of truth. That we would walk away and changed.

Lord, we pray for those who are not with us this morning because they are in a bit of suffering. We love them. We don't want to see them go through this. But Father, at those moments, we cast them at Your mercy too. And we pray you would be a God who would uphold them in the midst of this trial. Lord, open our eyes to new things in Your word, that we may learn it and grow. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

If you would open your Bibles with me to the book of Hebrews. That's where we're going today. We're going to look in Hebrews chapter 11. And as you're turning there, I want to ask you the question, when is your faith demonstrated the most? In good times or bad times? I think we'd all say bad, right? We

would all say our faith is seen in the valleys. I want you to read Hebrews 11 with me as you're meditating on that because it says this. It says,

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection;

But I want you to notice what the rest of this list says. In the middle of verse 35,

others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

And all these, having gained approval through their faith

I want to stop the reading there. Because I don't have to tell you, as you look at all of this, this is quite a passage, isn't it? And there's a lot in there to talk about. That's a grand total, if I'm getting the number right, of 28 events from the Old Testament. All I mentioned right in this little space right here. It comes to about three per verse. If you follow along with me again, some of these it's a little hard to number them, but there are four in verse 33. There's five in verse 34. There's two in verse 35. Four in verse 36. Nine in verse 37, and four in verse 38. Makes this one of the most action packed parts of the Bible, I think. It's just full of life and energy.

But if you notice an answer to the question, "When is your faith demonstrated the most in good times or bad times? In mountaintops or valleys?" Really, the answer is kind of both. They're both in here. And verse 32 says, "For time will fail me, if I tell of Gideon Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets who by faith," and then he goes on to talk about the good and the bad. The good is mentioned in verses 33 through 35. The bad is mentioned in verse 35 through 38.

And I won't go back over them again, for the sake of time, other than to point out that this list runs through the gamut of human experience. It goes from the very top of things to the very lowest point. I mean, they got to see God shut the mouths of lions, how amazing is that? Right? That would have been tremendous to see. And the same time, they were tortured and mocked and stoned, which is the worst. You can't get any lower than that. But the point the author's making here is that the people of God

experience life from both angles. And the one thing that got them through it was their faith like it is with you and me.

Just to give you some background for this, if you remember, the book of Hebrews was written to the Jews, or to the Jewish people who left a dead religion of works for Christ. And when they did, we haven't talked about this a lot before, but when they did, they paid a price for it. And they were shunned. They were shamed. And they were avoided by members of their community. Some of them lost their jobs for it. Some of them were divorced by their spouses. Some of them were thrown out in the street. History even tells us it was so bad that a few of them had to witness their parents hold a funeral for them in their home. Where they told them, "You're dead to me now. I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore." Which was discouraging as you can imagine. I mean, the whole thing broke their heart. So in order to encourage them, the author of Hebrews writes this large book. And when he comes to chapter 11, he shows that the people who came before them had to go through that too.

I mean, we've been going through the Hall of Faith for several months now as a church we've been studying in since January. And one thing you discover when you go through this list is that these people did not have it easy. Amen? I mean, Amen? We'll go back through it again, if you didn't get it the first time. I mean, when men like Abel and Enoch and Noah believed life did not get better. It got worse. It wasn't a simple road to glory. It wasn't a smooth trip to heaven. The narrow road got narrower and narrower and narrower. But at the same time, the whole passage says it wasn't all bad either. Look at what these people did in the midst of the pain. Noah built an ark. Abraham started a family. David established a dynasty. Gideon defeated the Midianites. Enoch was raptured. Rahab was saved from the destruction of Jericho. Those are just a few things. But the point is that in the midst of all that pain, God was showing them grace. It's been said that when God prepares a man for ministry, He always takes him aside and flogs him first, in order to bring diamonds out of the rock. And this is what's going on in Hebrews 11. God is flogging these people and bringing diamonds out of them.

I mention that because it has been a rough week here at Grace Fellowship. And as we've talked about just a moment ago, like a lot of these Hebrew Christians, you found yourselves in a difficult place for various reasons. And it makes you wonder, that age old question, "why? Why is this happening? If God loves me, why does He let me struggle like I do?" And to be honest, we don't have answers to all those questions. But one thing you know is that it happens to everybody. These people experience that; you will do. And another thing you know is that God is sovereign, Amen. He didn't fall off the throne just because you went to the hospital. He didn't lose his place in heaven just because we went through our trials. He's using it to help us and build us up. I was just in the hospital with Vicki. And I was telling her that the sovereignty of God is like one of those beautiful tapestries you find at the store, where the back of it is all knotted and twisted and ugly. And that's what life is like down here. It's an ugly life sometimes. It's twisted, you don't know why this is here, and how that fits into there. But when you flip it around on the other side, it's beautiful. Everything matches, the contours are perfect, the colors are glorious. That's what God sees in heaven. One day, we'll see it too. There'll be a time when all this

suffering makes sense. But in the meantime, we have to wrestle with these things. And that's what we're going to do in this passage.

What I want to do this morning is look at two areas where the people of God show their faith in the Old Testament. So this is our outline for today. But in Hebrews 11 in these verses we just read, I want us to look at two areas where they showed their faith.

And the first one is in how they handled good times. The first area where they show faith is in the seasons of blessing and the good times, and positive moments in life. It wasn't just gloom, doom and despair for these people, they had a lot to be thankful for. And as we get into this, I just have to beg your patience. Because like I said, there's 28 events in this entire passage, three per verse. I can't touch them all. There's just no way. I actually tried to do that in the beginning of the week, and somewhere about Thursday, I had a mental breakdown. I can't fit it all into one sermon, you've just got to kind of pick and choose. So if you have questions on other ones, please forgive me. I really wanted to cover all.

But if you notice in verse 32, way back up there, the author actually alludes to what he's doing here, because he says in verse 32, "What more shall I say?" In other words, "I've spent thirty something verses telling you about the faith of the people in the Old Testament. At this point in the chapter, I've given you example after example of how they trusted in God," but now he says, "what more can I tell you?" In other words, "We've got to sum this up, fellas. If I talked about every story in the Old Testament, we'd be here all day long. So let's just wrap this up." And what he does is he starts giving you a list of some positive things that took place in Israel. They're random in the list, there's not a chronological order here. So if you're looking for one, some come from one part of the Bible; some come from another part. But let's look at a few of these.

The first one is that in verse 33, they conquered kingdoms. You see that there? He says, "what more shall I say?" mentions these people, and then he says, "who by faith, they conquered kingdoms." That refers to the kingdoms in the Promised Land. That's what some of the Jews' faith did. It took over the nations of the Canaanites, Amorites and Girgashites, the Hittites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The Bible tells us, the Jews started to conquer them when they first entered the land, but they wouldn't finish until later on at the time of the kings. They would fight an area, get a few victories, but then those people would rise up again and so forth and so on. The time of the judges was a time when the people of the land were very rebellious against Israel, Israel was almost taken over numerous times. But in the time of the kings, they brought them to heel.

It's quite an achievement because the kingdoms in the Promised Land were not like nations you see today, where they rolled over large pieces of land. These were small city states that rolled over a few pieces of territory with one here and another one there, and a tiny kingdom in this place and a tiny kingdom in that one, which would have been hard to conquer because they were so spread out. Logistically it was almost unheard of for one man to rule them all. But 1 Kings 4 says Solomon did that,

and he made them bring tribute. He rolled over a land of about 8,000 square miles. Doesn't seem like a big deal to you because the nation of Canada is about 4 million square miles. But it was a big deal to Israel. For the first time in their history, they had peace. And for the first moment they can remember there was rest on every side.

And the point the author's making here is that had happened through faith. Humanly speaking, there was little way that a man like Solomon or David could subdue those tiny kingdoms on his own. So it happened as he trusted in the Lord.

I mean, when I was reading this first one here, I was kind of wrestling a little bit with how to relate this to our world today because most of us have never lived in a time of war. We've only known peace, but I've been told war is terrible. But when peace comes, it's an amazing experience because the whole nation celebrates. People close up their shops, they shut down their stores, they go out into the streets, and hug each other out of sheer joy and happiness. That's what this is describing. I was walking through Thompson Park in Chilliwack, a few months ago, and I came across a memorial stone there that said, during World War Two, 10% of the population of Canada join the military. Can you believe? That 10% means that out of a nation of about 11 million people, 750,000 went to war. And 44,000 died, which is a tremendous amount of casualties for a country this size. And it impacted everyone to such a degree that when it was over, they had a holiday over it. They were overwhelmed with joy. A lot of them just stopped whatever they were doing, went down to the train station, and welcomed the men home. That's what the Jews got to experience.

It didn't last for long. The peace was kind of short lived. It wouldn't be too long after this, that the people of Israel would sin and start fighting again, and they would plunge themselves into civil war. But for a brief moment, they enjoyed it. So that's one good time that's being mentioned here just to give you a flavor of this and a taste.

There's another one that's mentioned here as well, and I really couldn't go through this text without talking about this one because it's so fascinating. But it says they shut the mouths of lions. You see that one next in the passage as well. If you read all of verse 33, it says, "who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises," and here this one, is "they shut the mouths of lions." Now, I don't have to tell you who that's talking about. Who's that talking about? Daniel, right? One of the most interesting people in the Bible. When I was a kid, I first learned about Daniel through flannel graphs. You might remember flannel graphs, it was Velcro things you used to put stuff on. And when I read through a list like this, I have Velcro images in my mind of these people. In fact, I've had several people ask me as we've gone through the Hall of Faith, "Why isn't Daniel in here? He's such a godly man. So why does the author leave him out?" Well, the answer is that he doesn't leave them out. He just puts them in like this.

Because the Bible tells us that after the Jews were plunged into that civil war after Solomon, they sinned to the point that they were eventually driven from the land. They were captured by the Assyrians and Babylonians and exiled and taken into slavery, where people like Daniel ended up serving the foreign rulers. For years, the Jews ruled themselves; they were an autonomous country, but after the exile, that all changed for them. Now they're under other powers in other places. And Daniel ends up under a man named Darius who made a decree that no one could pray to anyone but himself for 30 days. They couldn't pray to Baal, they couldn't pray to Asherah, they couldn't pray to Yahweh like the Jews did, they could only do it to the king. And what did Daniel say? He said, "No."

Do you ever wonder if civil disobedience is mentioned in the Bible? Yes, it is. Daniel did it. Even though he was a politician and known to the king and he ran in circles of power, when this decree came down, he told himself, "I'm not going to do that. My relationship with God means too much to me." And he had a lot to lose in doing that, by the way. He wasn't a nobody in Babylon. He had built himself a reputation there. So it would be easy to say, "Well, you know, the king didn't ask me to stop reading my Bible. And he didn't ask me to stop visiting fellow Jews and talking about Yahweh. He just asked me to stop praying for 30 days. Not 40 days, not 50 days, not a year, just a few days. And that's it. What's the harm in that? What's the problem?" Daniel said to himself, "The problem is once you start going down that road, it's hard to stop. Isn't it? It's a slippery slope. This time the king asked me for 30 days; next time, it could be 100. So I'm going to stand up to him now." Which is what he did under threat of death, because after he defied, the Bible says the king threw him into a lion's den. And as you can see, in this passage, this is what happened when he was thrown in there. It says the Lord shut their mouths. That means He kept the lions from eating him. The Babylonians, the Assyrians, oftentimes what they would do in scenarios like that, they would have a den of lions set aside to torture people with and they would starve them. So that when you put a person in there, you knew what was going to happen, the lion was going to eat him alive. That was the typical way they would do it. But these lions did not eat him. In fact, the lions were so hungry, the passage says that after they brought Daniel out of the den, the King put his accusers into the den, and they crushed all their bones before they hit the ground. Because the Lord did a miracle here.

And what makes it so amazing, I think when you consider the topic of suffering in a story like this one is that God did not keep Daniel from the lion's den, the Lord joined him in it. Does that make sense? Do you get that? He didn't keep Daniel from a place of suffering. He put him in a place of suffering. But He didn't leave him alone. You know, when you're suffering, you often think, "Why did God do this to me?" Right? Why did He leave me alone? Well, the answer is He doesn't leave you alone. He goes through the problems with you. That's when His mercy is displayed. That's when He shows you His grace. There were lessons I'm sure Daniel learned in the lions' den, he wouldn't have learned anywhere else. And there were things about God that he discovered in this place of sorrow and misery and darkness that he would not have found in another place. Sometimes the Lord does that. Sometimes He takes you to a hospital bed to teach you things. Sometimes He puts you in the ER room to show you

things about His character. Sometimes He puts you in a cancer ward. So you can learn the principles of humility, and patience, and long suffering.

A couple of nights ago, our men were going through the book of Romans, a couple of weeks ago, actually. On Tuesday nights, and we came to Romans five, which says that “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;” And I’ll always remember that study because the men wouldn’t stop talking about it. It’s hard to get men chattery, by the way; they don’t chatter a whole lot. But they just kept talking because when they heard the word, perseverance, all the men said, “I need that.” It’s one thing to be a Christian for a few days; it’s another thing to do it for a lifetime. I want to persevere. And the Bible Study leader said, “The only way you get to persevere is by going through the first part of the verse.” And that’s the tribulations. It’s no crown without a cross. There’s no gain without pain. And there’s no road to victory without a road of suffering. Because this is a good time that’s being mentioned here, but the good time of Daniel came out of a place of pain.

It leads to another good time these people experienced. I won’t go through all these, like I said, but let me talk about another one quickly. They quenched the power of fire. That’s another one we have talked about. If you look in the verse I just described in verse 33, it says, “they shut the mouths of lions,” and then it says “they quench the power of fire.” And now who is that talking about? You guys can tell me? Shadrach Meshach and Abednego. Right? Daniel’s three friends. You heard about them too probably growing up. They lived at the same time Daniel did. They were contemporaries of this man. They were Jews who were taken out of Israel during the exile sent to Babylon. And while they’re there, they faced a similar problem. Daniel is told, “You have to pray to the king.” They’re told, “You have to worship his statue.” See the connection there? He’s commanded to sin one way; they’re commanded to sin another way.

In fact, this wasn’t just a statue. This was a massive edifice that was 90 feet tall, nine feet wide, set up in a plane in an open area so that on a certain day, every ruler in the kingdom was supposed to show up in front of it and fall down. In fact, when it says they’re supposed to fall down in the Old Testament, that means they’re supposed to go flat on their face and prostrate themselves like this. The eastern peoples would do that sort of thing a lot. Anytime an official would walk into a room or a noble or a king, they’re supposed to go flat.

So that wasn’t so unusual for Shadrach Meshach and Abednego; the unusual thing is that they’re supposed to also worship the statue, and that’s where they drew the line. They said no. So the king sent for them gives them a second chance you remember this story? Because he says, “Maybe you misunderstood me. Shadrach Meshach and Abednego, if you don’t bow when that music plays, to that statue in that place over there, you’re gonna die. I’m gonna put you in the fiery furnace. I’m not playing games with you. This is not joke.” They said no again. In light of a second warning, they look their accuser in the eye, or at least they were talking to him and they said, “We’re not going to do it.”

I'm getting a little fired up about some of these stories. But don't you wish the church had more people like that in it? Wouldn't be great if more believers would stand up to people and tell them no? To the LGBTQ movement, we're not going to bow. To the Liberal Party in government, we're not going to bow. To the people who come to us and say, "Stop teaching about hell. Don't talk about wrath, don't mention a bloody cross. That's offensive, it hurts people's feelings." We're not going to bow. What do you think would happen to the country if Christians started acting that way? I think there'd be revival; the whole world would turn upside down. We can learn a lot from these me; they are so brave here.

But at the end of the day, the passage says they're still thrown into the fiery furnace. In fact, there's a famous statement that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego make right before they're put in; it's very important to this discussion because let me read it to you. Right before the king throws him in the furnace, they tell him this, they say,

Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

In other words, "Our God can save us; don't worry about that. And He can deliver us from your hands. But either way, we're not going to bow." That's a tremendous faith, isn't it? Because what these men are saying is that what they're saying here is, "God, we're putting our life into Your hands, let Your will be done. We know You can save us. We know You can deliver, we just don't know if it's Your will or not. So here's our hearts; do with them as You please. You're God and we're not. You're sovereign; we're just men. So we will acquiesce to that."

When you're suffering, you always have to come to a place where you say the same thing, by the way. You have to bow your knee to God. I think we understand as a church, we understand the theology of suffering, I think, in some sense. We believe God is sovereign. And we know that He chooses all things and predestines them, and plans them before the foundation of the world. But let me tell you what a lot of us have a problem with. We have a problem submitting to that, don't we? We have a problem looking to God and saying, "Your will be done. I'm standing outside a furnace, Your will be done. I'm failing at work, Your will be done. I'm struggling in my home, Your will be done. I'm trying to witness to my neighbor, it's not working, Your will be done." That's where these things become real. One of the Puritans used to say, "You have to learn how to kiss the hand that bears the rod, instead of trying to reach out and stop it all the time." When it strikes, it strikes for your benefit. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego understood that.

And we could go through more of these stories here. Another one is that it says in the end of all this that women receive back their dead by resurrection. I won't say anything about that other than to point out that was a reference to people like Elijah, Elisha also. They were used by God to raise someone from the dead. But the point in this passage is that the Lord was constantly doing good things like this for his people. He was continually showing them blessings, whether it be through resurrections, or miracles, or deliverances, whether it be through conquest or victory, or triumphs in the Promised Land.

You see evidences of God's grace on every page of the Old Testament. There was sunshine amidst the rain back then. There were seasons of light amidst the darkness. It wasn't all bleak for these people. It wasn't bad every day. The way some Christians talk today, they say life is like that. Don't they? It's bad every day. Go to the grocery store, it's bad. Turn on the news, it's bad. Go to Tim Hortons to get a doughnut, it's bad. What's bad about a doughnut? That's not a biblical way to look at life. When you see life through the lens of Scripture you find positive things too. There's lots of them all throughout this section of the passage. Remember that the author's writing these things because the people in the book of Hebrews are struggling and facing discouragement, and he's trying to build them up in it. To show them that God is still good.

And that brings us to another thing to talk about this morning, another area where the people of God showed faith, they show it in the good times when positive things were happening, but another one is in the bad times. So if you're taking notes, again, this sermon outline's very simple. A second area where these people showed faith in the Old Testament is in the bad times, which refers to the way they handled negative moments. They had a lot of those. In fact, when you look at the list here, and you count them out, there are more bad times mentioned than good times because there were times when the Lord delivered them from a fiery furnace. There were times when He stopped the mouths of lions, but there were other times when He did not. If you read in verses 35 and 38, it says this. It says,

And others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

And I'll stop the reading there because I just want you to look at that word, others. When he says "others" there, what he's saying is that some experience this, while some experienced that. Some people in the Old Testament got to have the thrill of conquering kingdoms, and performing acts of righteousness, but others had to be tortured. It's not a one size fits all sort of thing. When you believe in Jesus, and put your trust in God, everything doesn't just fall into place for you. It's not a bunch of flowers and roses, where you go around defeating your enemies all day. Sometimes your enemies defeat you too. Very important to remember that. When you visit someone in the hospital, and you see someone who's hurting, one thing they often say is "What did I do wrong?" Sometimes the answer is nothing. You didn't do anything wrong. Or when they're at work, and they're getting in trouble for

professing their faith in Christ, they ask the same thing. “How did I mess up?” Sometimes you didn't mess up at all; you did the right thing. That's what's happening here.

And this section, you could actually put it into three categories. They're not in chronological order either. So they happen in various times.

But the first one is that they're tortured, and they face physical abuse. Verse 35 says, “Women received back they're dead by resurrection, others were tortured.” The word ‘torture’ here in English, it's very broad could refer to a lot of tortureings; a lot of bad things. But in Greek, it's very specific. It's the word *tympanan* from which we get the word tambourine or drum. Because it doesn't refer to any type of torture. This is one where the victim is laid out over a drum or a barrel, their hands are tied down, and they're beaten, and hit like a drum.

I looked it up. I couldn't find anyone in the Old Testament that was brutalized this way. If you think of someone, come up to me afterwards, I'll write it in my notes. I did find someone who was killed or tortured like this after the Old Testament was written; one of the commentaries talked about a 90 year old man named Eleazer, who was captured during some of the intertestamental years in the Maccabean wars. He was told to give up the Jewish faith, and he said, “No.” So that's what they did to him. They stripped him of his clothes, put him over a barrel, and just started beating him while saying, “Obey the king. Obey the king. Obey the king.” And Eleazer wouldn't do it. He chose to defy.

Verse 35 gives you the motivation and reason why some people did this. When it says some men chose to act this way, so that they would obtain a better resurrection. And that's a play on words because the author has just referred to the resurrection of some women's sons in verse 35. Or “women receive back their dead by resurrection.” And that could specifically refer to the time Elijah raised a widow's son, and he came back to life. And now the author says men like this suffered, so they would receive a better version of that where they would go to heaven and receive a new body and meet God and live forever in glorified state. They weren't just thinking about this life, they're thinking about the next one. It says they were subject to mockings or being made fun of. The foreign enemies would call them names. It's all kinds of names that people called the Jews back then, “dirty Jew,” things like that. Scourgings as well. That's a form of persecution where, instead of being placed over a barrel, you're put up against a wall, and they beat you with a whip until the blood comes down your back. It mentions chains and imprisonment. This is just a nasty list.

Everything in here is miserable because the idea that the author is expressing is that God leads His people through that too. He often lets them experience pain, shame and misery. He puts them through trials, tribulations and sorrow. We just talked about times where the Lord delivers people from that. Sometimes He puts them in it. Jesus made it very clear that “A servant is not above his Master. And a messenger is not greater than the One who sent him. So if they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.” Which means if they mocked Christ, they'll mock you. And if they scourged Him, they will scourge you.

And if they beat Him, they'll beat you. If they tortured Him, they'll torture you. If they made fun of Him, you'll experience the same thing. And don't be shocked when it happens. This kind of thing, He says, goes all the way back to the Old Testament. You don't just open the pages of the New Testament and these things are occurring. It occurs in the Old as well. Second, Timothy 3:12 says, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That means all. Old and young, rich and poor, male and female, if you follow Christ, this will come for you in some shape, form or fashion.

And it brings it to another category of these bad times, and that is martyrdom. If you're following along and your Bible here, not only did the authorities torture these people, it says they were also martyred, or killed them. Verse 37 says, "They were stoned, sawn in two, and they were tempted, and put to death with the sword." That's a brief list of some ways that the authorities killed these people. It says they were stoned, that was one that's probably familiar to you. Several people experienced stonings in the Bible, you would stone a man at that time by putting him up against the wall and throwing stones at him until he died. That was one way they would do that. The accusers were often the ones to throw the first stone. Another way they would do it is they would take it to a high place and push you off a cliff, or just some kind of high elevation. And if it didn't kill you, then they would throw stones at you. And the Mishnah, or the oral rabbi's commentary on the Old Testament has long descriptions of how you're supposed to do that. Imagine that. You had to throw them off it was a place that was twice the height of the man. And then in order to make sure it killed him, you had to roll them over on his back. And then if it didn't kill him, you had to throw rocks of a certain size on his chest first. They just went too long, just because this thing happened. Zachariah, the priest, went through this in the book of 2 Chronicles. The book of Acts in the New Testament says Stephen suffered this way.

And it doesn't stop there; the verse also says they were sawn in two. And to be honest of all the ones in here that you read about I think this is the worst one. It's almost too bad to even talk about. But according to Jewish history, it says the prophet Isaiah died this way. After serving Israel for years, the wicked king Manasseh heard enough of his preaching. In order to silence him, he placed Isaiah between two hollow logs and sawed him up the middle. There's even a book written about this called *The Ascension of Isaiah*, which says that as they did that to him, he offered no complaint, he shed no tears, he just kept praying; and as he was praying, his enemies stood to the side and laughed. It's bad enough if you're being killed that way but his enemies are laughing.

The text mentions that they were put to death with the sword. A lot of people died like that during the intertestamental times, the Maccabean wars, execution by sword was common.

I don't know about you, but when I read this, it really destroys the concept of a health and wealth gospel, doesn't it? I mean, it totally obliterates the idea that if you follow Christ or the Lord, He will give you your best life now. Where did these people get that? Where did Isaiah get his best life now? Where was Zechariah, or some of these other people, given health and wealth? They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with a sword. Listen friends, as a Christian, your best life doesn't come now; it

comes later. And it's not found down here in this world on this side of the tapestry. And this side is ugly. This side looks like this sometimes. It's found on the other side. I tell you this because I know some of us have professed faith in Christ recently, some of you have been baptized, some of you told me that you've come to the Lord and in recent weeks and months, and maybe years, which is amazing. And praise the Lord for that. May that thing increase here at Grace Fellowship Church. But if you've done that, we will be doing a great disservice for you if we didn't stop for a moment and ask you to look at this passage and ask yourself the question, "Do I want this? Am I willing to do this for Christ?" We may not be facing that right now in Canada, but a day may come. It may not be occurring right now in 2023 in this part of the world, but there's no guarantee you'll be spared. If you don't want this, you picked the wrong religion. Christ is not for you. Jesus never hid the fact that His salvation comes with a demand as well as an offer. And the demand is that you have to take up the cross, count the cost, and die.

Which brings me to one more category here of these bad times, and that's just deprivation. You see torture; you see martyrdom. There's also deprivation, which is where the people aren't killed, they're just deprived of something. Because it goes on to say they went about in sheepskins and goat skins. Makes you think of Elijah right? Remember what Elijah wore? Let me tell you it wasn't anything you would find at the mall. You wouldn't find his outfit in the window at Kohl's. Kohl's is one of the only department stores I even know about. I had to write that in my notes because I don't know anything about department stores. But the Bible says he was a hairy man with a leather belt. That could be translated that he had a hairy cloak that was made out of some type of animal skin, sheepskin, goats and camels hair. That was all he could afford. This passage says they were destitute, which means people overlooked them. People looked at these prophets and men of God and said, "What an idiot." They watched them do their ministry and said, "What a fool. They preach and preach and preach and nobody listens. They prophesy and prophesy; nobody pays attention."

It says, "They were afflicted, ill-treated, men of whom the world was not worthy, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground." Which could refer to Elijah when he fled from Jezebel. That could have referred to Obadiah when he hid the 100 prophets, it could refer to David when he was fleeing from Saul. But the question the author's asking here is "How do you get through these things?" You do it through faith. How do you experience something like this and persevere? Keep your eyes fixed on the Lord.

Which is convicting to read about because to be honest, the church in Canada has not experienced a lot of this. Things have ramped up in recent years, but we've been spared from a lot of these horrible things. You don't know anybody who's been stoned, I don't think. I don't know anybody has been sawn in two. But for some Christians in other parts of the world, this thing is happening. Lifeway Christian magazine published an article where they said that there are more Christians being persecuted for the faith right now than in any other time in history because in the past year, 360 million Christians or one in seven believers has been deprived of something. When I was thinking about this, I came across an article that the Master's Academy International put out, that's a missions agency that trains pastors in other

countries; it's connected to the seminary I went to; they do it overseas. They put out a Facebook post that told about one of its graduates in an unnamed country. I'm guessing it's the Ukraine, but I don't know. He was captured while ministering in the midst of war, and while he was there, the authorities broke all the toes in his feet, and they broke his arm, and for more than a week, he couldn't say anything because his jaw was swollen from the abuse. They were putting them in a military hospital. Some other believers heard about it, they broke them out, they freed him. And now he's in Poland where he's sharing the gospel, and they're considering planning a church there. But the article went on to say that sometimes the Lord uses things like that to do great things for His name. Because they remind you, Jesus is always with you, no matter what. When you're tortured, and mocked, and scourged, and you have your toes broken, it reminds you He will not let you go.

Charles Spurgeon once said that Noah could fall in the ark, but he can never fall out of it. In the same way, Christians can fall into hardship, and you can fall into difficulties, and you can get a mouthful of splinters, and have all these terrible things happen, but you will never fall out of His tender loving care, ever.

When it tells you “by faith” here, and it mentions all these good things, and all these bad things, one lesson behind all that is a God was with His people in every moment that's being described here. He didn't leave them in verse 35. He didn't walk away when they were starting to experience torture. He continued to show His grace and mercy even then, which brings you to one more thing to talk about this morning. And that's just the conclusion of all this.

You know, we've seen how the people in the Old Testament experienced good times and bad times, and they trusted God in the mountains and valleys of life. We've looked at, if we number it, 28 examples of this or give or take something like that. But that's not how the author ends it. He's not just giving you a history lesson here. This is not just about stories to him. He wants you to give you a word of exhortation. And here's the word of exhortation in verse 39. He says,

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

Now, when you read that, some of that might be hard to follow because of the way it's worded. But there's three main words you can take away from this exhortation that are so powerful, I want to tell them to you, and you'll see them all in the text.

The first one is approve. You see that word there? It means that when you have faith in God, He will approve of you. When you trust Him through the good times and bad times, the highs and lows, the mountaintops and valleys, this is what God does. He embraces you as His own. The reason that's important is because he's been talking about people that the world does not approve of, right? Starting in

verse 35, and going all the way down to verse 38, he's telling you example after example, of people the world rejects. And now at the end, he tells you about those God accepts and approves, and that's those who trust in Him. Which means these believers who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, were sawn in two, they were made right with God on this basis, the principle of grace alone. It wasn't because they earned it. It wasn't because of works. It wasn't because of the false idea that some teach that if you're martyred that makes you go to heaven. That's not what's being said here. It happened because of faith, that's all. Same way with you and me. No different for them.

It brings you to another closing word he gives you here, and that's the word better. You can see that word written as well in the passage. Because this passage reminds you that when you have faith in God, God provides something better. It says, "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us."

When it says that they did not receive what was promised, that's a reference to the Messiah. It could reference some other promises as well, but one promise is the Saviour that was to come. The Jews had not received Him yet at the end of the Old Testament because the Jews lived through the time of the Judges, and the Messiah had not come. And they lived through the time of the Kings that's described in Hebrews 11, and the Messiah had not come. They lived through the time of the Prophets, no Messiah. They lived through the intertestamental years, it was the same way. And the question is, how did they get through it? Through all those years of suffering and pain and misery with no salvation? How did they endure? They did it by remembering God had something better. Something better than the suffering, something better than the trials, something better than all the things of this world.

Listen, friends, let me ask you, don't you want something better? I told you about the trials people are going through at the beginning of the sermon. Aren't you sick of things like that? Anybody else? It gets old. If I never have to go weep with someone in the hospital again, I'll be a happy man. It breaks your heart. The good news is you don't have to do that forever. You hold on for a little while. It'll be over soon, because God is bringing better things. They were looking for a Messiah; you have the Messiah, but you're waiting for heaven.

One more closing word on this is found in the term perfect. You see this one here? When you have faith in God, listen, this is important, it makes you perfect. Verse 40 says, "So that apart from us, they would not be made perfect." Now, and that's a kind of a complex way of saying, apart from our age, when Christ came, the Jews could not be made right with God. But now that Christ has come, the redemption is here, and they have been made perfect. You look at all these people in the Old Testament. You wonder how were they saved? The sacrifices didn't do it. The law could not forgive them. How did they get to heaven? The answer is Christ; it's the same way as you. They were looking forward to Him; you're looking back. But it's the same.

This word perfect. It's the Greek word *teleios* which is the same word Jesus used on the cross when He said, "It's finished." And that doesn't mean it's morally finished. It means it's functionally finished. The

moment Christ died, that took care of everything that would ever be needed to save you. Done. He didn't need to come back. He doesn't need to return during Transubstantiation at the mass. That's not necessary. Finished. One author said recently that "When Jesus said, 'It's finished,' He didn't say, 'I made a down payment on your sin and you have to make the rest.' He said, 'I wiped it away. I took the loan out that you had, and I threw it in the trash and burned it. So you could write finished over every single sin in your life.' Abortion, finished. Adultery, finished. Lies, finished. Divorce, finished. Embezzlement, finished. Homosexuality, finished. Murder, finished. Pride, finished. Sloth, finished. legalism, finished. Hypocrisy, finished. No matter where you have failed, Jesus has provided a finish and perfect forgiveness.

Which is a great way to wrap this up because we started off this morning talking about suffering and pain and the ways you struggle. And when you struggle, you're always wrestling with this issue of "Am I enough? Am I adequate?" Well, you're not adequate, but He is. He makes you perfect through His name. That's where you put your trust. You're going through trials and you're in the pits, and you're in the lowest points of life, you put your trust in the cross.

Next week, we're going to continue this discussion because we're going to look at one of the most popular passages in Hebrews. It's found in Chapter 12:1, I just want to read it to you so you can get a foretaste. But he says, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Why do we need to run? Because we have a perfect Saviour, amen? Why do you need to endure? Because the cross has made you spotless in the eyes of God. Please come back and join us for that it should be good.

You know for now, in my studies this week, I came across a time a man went to a pastor for counseling, and he was suffering. And he thought God hated him; that was what he was wrestling with. Same thing we're talking about today. And he ranted and railed and cursed about the problems in his life until he finally blurted out this question. He said, "Preacher, tell me, what has your God ever done for a sinner like me?" You know what he did? There was a cross hanging on the back wall, and he pointed at it, and he said, "He did that for a sinner like you." And the man believed and softened his heart and received the gospel.

I don't know where everyone's at this morning on this issue. But maybe some of you need to soften your heart to God. You think of the suffering in your life and the pain that you've gone through and all the misery, and you've got to admit, you're bitter about this. You're angry at your heavenly Father. It's spoiling your relationships. It's spoiling your life. You know what the answer to that is, you need to look at that. You need to look at the cross. That's where His love for you is shown the greatest.

Let me pray that you would, and the Christ would be glorified in the things that we've discussed.

Heavenly Father, we thank You, Lord, for passages like this that we've read. We thank You for them because they're so applicable to our lives. I mean, there's not a person in this room that doesn't suffer somewhere, somehow. You've made it so clear, that there is freedom in Christ; there is deliverance from these things in eternity. We look forward to that day.

Lord I pray for those who were here this morning who don't have any hope. They feel like they don't have anything to look forward to. They are becoming hardened in their sin and bitter at You. Lord, I pray they would read over this again, as they go home and realize you are a God, who does care deeply about them. You're not removed from us. You're not distant. You're not some kind of watchmaker that wound up the world and let it alone. You're a God who is with us day in and day out. Your mercies are new. Every morning we wake up. One day there's mercy; the next day, it's the same.

Thank you, Father, for Your kindness. Lord, will we go out this morning and live in light of this? I know I prayed at the beginning for those who are not with us who are suffering, but I pray as well for them again here at the end because they're going to have to apply this the most this week. They're gonna have to think through these principles at the most personal heartfelt level. Would You give them grace to do so Lord? Thank You, Father, for the kind of Lord You are, and the love You show for Your saints. Would You go with us now as we walk into this world where things are ugly, but on the other side, there's so much hope. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.