

For All the Saints
Hebrews 11:30–40
June 2, 2024

When we began Hebrews 11 a few weeks back, we did so by noting how effective example is. To be more specific, when something we're facing stretches us—or maybe even *overwhelms* us—we're helped by talking to or observing someone who's done it before. This could be a project in the yard or on the house, it could be the ACT, parenting teenagers, or caring for an aging parent. Examples show us that it *can* be done; and they show us *how* it can be done. We began Hebrews 11 with that in mind. After five weeks in it, I *still* believe that's much of the function of Hebrews 11 in the overall argument.

The context seems to agree, as the last few verses of chapter 10 help to introduce this chapter. How did those verses describe those reading this book? Hebrews 10:36: **For you have need of endurance.** We've said it once or twice before: in the face of persecution, these Jewish Christians were struggling to endure. Knowing that, the author pleads with them *not* to turn back to that which is lesser. Repeatedly he holds forth Christ *so that* they might hold fast. As simple as it might sound, much of the function of Hebrews 11—example after example after example—is to show them, and *us*, that enduring faith is possible.¹

Today we take this one step further, by going farther away. That is, if considering examples of faith can help us to endure, it's worth saying that we need examples from more than our own era. Though that's been *implied* throughout the past few weeks—as the characters we've considered have been men and women from thousands of years ago—it ought to be more than implied.

To make the case, let me appeal, first, to C. S. Lewis's argument for reading old books. We're not the first Christians to read the Bible and try and figure out how to live by faith. So, Lewis writes, “If you join at eleven o'clock a conversation that began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said.” He goes on to write that every age has its own outlook, seeing certain truths clearly, but also liable to making certain mistakes. He's *not* saying there's some golden age of history we're to fix our eyes on and emulate. Instead, he writes, “They made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes.”² The logic is: since we can't watch the lives of the dead, we ought to read what they said.³

Secondly, let me appeal to a book I've mentioned before, Alan Jacobs' *Breaking Bread with the Dead*. Jacobs agrees with Lewis, of course. Yet, in his book, Jacobs argues that reading old books doesn't *merely* keep us from the mistakes of the present age, it also helps make sense of our present, putting it in its proper perspective. He contends that in our day—with information overload arriving at breathtaking speed (what he calls the “pre-packaged bubble of the new”) —many of us have become prisoners of the present. The 24-hour news cycle means we've entirely forgotten events from two weeks ago. Maybe we'd ask, “Is that bad? Is there something inherently wrong with living in the moment?” Not in *all* cases, necessarily, unless our obsession with the present—with what's right in front of us—also makes us more likely to live *merely* by sight. And insofar as being obsessed with the present means *that*—without any perspective concerning the past or any contemplation of the future—present difficulties will be more likely to throw us around.⁴

¹ Chris Bruno, Jared Compton, and Kevin McFadden, *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*, NSBT, 179.

² Lewis's introduction to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 13.

³ And be delivered from what Lewis would elsewhere call “chronological snobbery.”

⁴ Alan Jacobs writes in *Breaking Bread with the Dead*, that “the deeper your understanding of the past, the greater *personal density* you will accumulate,” 19.

It wouldn't be hard to argue that's *some* of what the author wars against in Hebrews 11. It's not merely one example the author chooses to list, as in, "look at Moses," and "keep looking at Moses." Instead, he lists example after example from age after age. For these readers of the book of Hebrews, zooming out to see the history of God's dealings with His people grants a perspective they couldn't get otherwise. And from that better angle, the hope is that they might better understand what's happening in their present. And then, the better they might endure.

We'll consider this text under three headings.

1. Throughout history, God's people have lived by faith (vv. 4–31)

As I've mentioned a couple times, some would say that Hebrews 11 is made up of two lists. And if that's the case, verses 30 and 31 end the first list. So, let's back up a bit. A running start will help us hear the crescendo of this chapter better. First, after defining faith in verses 1–3, verse 4 begins with Genesis 4. Abel believed God, offering to Him a better sacrifice. But Abel's faith didn't mean that all went well. He believed; and it cost him his life.

That's the first example of faith given. The second example is in verse 5, moving us from Genesis 4 to Genesis 5: **By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death.** In Enoch we see that the examples in chapter 11 aren't going to be *limited* to faith and suffering. Noah and his family are delivered (v. 7). Sarah conceived (v. 11). Abraham's descendants become as the stars of heaven (v. 12). Isaac didn't die on the altar (v. 19). The Israelites passed through the Red Sea (v. 29).

Abel believed and suffered. Enoch believed and was delivered. They're united by faith. They're distinguished by outcome, at least in one sense. Could the author have stopped at verse 5? Has he made the point? In one sense, yes. But, apparently, he hasn't. He keeps going.

We might ask ourselves, if we're trying to prove a point, what's the difference between a short list and a long list? If I choose to make a point, and then *continue* making the same point by giving you a longer list of examples, why do I?

The author wasn't finished at Genesis 5. So, he moves on, at least initially, to Genesis 6. Noah lived by faith, believing what God said concerning his immediate future. He didn't have categories for that kind of rain. Still, he built the boat, by faith.

As you know, Hebrews 11 isn't close to over. Though the author does pick up the pace a bit, moving from Genesis 6 to Genesis 12. By faith, Abraham obeyed. Not knowing where he was going, he went (v. 8). A nation had been promised him, blessing assured. Though Abraham was **as good as dead** (v. 12), Sarah believed, considering Him faithful who had promised (v. 13).

Having considered Abel, Enoch, Abraham, and Sarah, the text then moved to consider the rest of the Patriarchs. Isaac, in faith, believed the promise given by God and blessed his sons' future (v. 20). Jacob, by faith, expanded the scope by blessing his grandchildren based on the promise given his grandfather (v. 21). Then Joseph—on his death bed—before anyone had ever heard of Moses, by faith "remembered" the Exodus and gave orders concerning his bones (v. 22).

Now, maybe part of you hears all this and wonders within, "What's the big deal about all these ancient people? How is what happened thousands of years ago relevant?" If that's you, is it possible you're too zoomed in? And because of that, your understanding of God's purposes is myopic? Keep in mind that Abraham lived thousands of years before the book of Hebrews was written. And the author of Hebrews, or more importantly the One that inspired the author of Hebrews, believed Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph's faith mattered, *still*.

Do you *only* believe what you've seen, in person? Throughout history, God's people have lived by faith. This emphasis continued in Moses's life. By faith, he chose to endure ill-treatment with the people of God rather than enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (v. 25). He did so by looking to the reward, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt (v. 26).

How did he do all this? By seeing Him who is unseen (v. 27). That phrase, of course, echoes the definition of faith offered in verse 1, **the conviction of things not seen**. Moses, too, lived by faith.

And that brings us to our final two examples in this first list. But before I read it, consider all that the author skips when he moves on from Moses. Verse 30: **By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days**. The author did something intentional, jumping from the Red Sea in Exodus 14 all the way to Joshua 6.

What's *in between* those chapters? Quite a number of things, but notably the wilderness generation. As the author walks through the Old Testament narrative, doing something of a biblical theology of faith, he skips the generation he'd previously used as a warning. Why didn't that generation enter His rest? Unbelief (Heb. 3:19). They did *not* have conviction concerning things unseen.

If the author is considering those that lived by faith, there are chapters in the Old Testament to skip. He's fast-forwarded all the way to the book of Joshua in order to consider the walls of Jericho coming down, walls believed to be impenetrable.⁵ And I assume I don't have to remind you, but the strategy the people of God took to bring those walls down was *unquestionably* an act of faith.

Within that same chapter is the next example of faith. Verse 31: **By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace**. Maybe you find the choice of Rahab to be a bit puzzling. Yet, if you'd like to hear her name in an even *more* startling context, consider James 2. Not unlike Hebrews, James wrote an audience made up largely of Jewish Christians, those who would've known the Old Testament.⁶ And in James 2, when he lists examples of saving faith, he mentions two. Out of *all* the Old Testament, he picks a patriarch—Abraham—and a prostitute—Rahab.

Maybe the New Testament picks her for rhetorical effect, as in, “even *she* believed.”⁷ Yet, if you read the book of Joshua, it's pretty clear she was defined by *more* than her past. She courageously aligned herself with the people of God, no matter what those around her were doing.⁸ And she declared her rationale for doing so in Joshua 2: **for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath** (Josh. 2:11). She believed.

So, from Genesis 4 with Abel to Enoch to Noah to Abraham to Sarah to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, to Moses, and then to Joshua and Rahab—throughout history—the people of God have lived by faith, with assurance concerning things hoped for and conviction concerning things not seen. Is the author finished making his case? No, he's not.

2. Throughout history, God's people have lived by faith in varying conditions (vv. 32–38)

Many believe Hebrews is either a sermon or a series of sermons. As I mentioned a few weeks back, I do think it's *certain* the author is a preacher. How do we know? Because at the beginning of this sermon he's slow and methodical, moving from Genesis 4 to Genesis 5. He can't wait to walk through *each* and *every* character of faith in the Old Testament. And yet, as we've seen over the past few weeks, he's picked up the pace, skipping not merely chapters but entire books. And today we'll see, like many preachers since, he's running out of time. Verse 32: **And what more shall I say?**

⁵ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 341.

⁶ See Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 11–32.

⁷ Harris, 342.

⁸ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 366.

This was a common idiom in that era to signal limited time.⁹ It'd be akin to asking, "Should I go on?"

He *does* go on, in fact, but more quickly. Verse 32: **For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets.** As you can see, he's no longer going in chronological order.¹⁰ The rapid, detail-less, out of order, naming seems to indicate something about the nature of the list ahead.

In the weekly update last week, I mentioned a few examples of church members graciously sharing resources with other church members. In that note, I mentioned that I *could* go on. Let's say I did, with details sprinkled here and there. And then I started naming names one after another, but I did so with less and less detail until it eventually turned into a rhythmic barrage of names.¹¹ Would you think at the end of that email I'd named everyone? Of course not.

In fact, before we go much further into *this* list, we should note that the structure of the list itself seems to indicate the list could be extended indefinitely.¹² It's not intended to be exhaustive, but instead representative.¹³ So, to your deep disappointment I'm sure, I'm not going to say, "And now let's look at Gideon. And now let's spend two paragraphs on Jephthah." That's not the function of the passage.

However, we can notice a few things cumulatively. First, if you were to read Judges this afternoon, you'd be right to wonder how Samson snuck into the Cooperstown of faith. He's not alone in that sense. You'll find weakness and sin in every person on this list, from Barak to Jephthah, even to David and Samuel. It's worth pointing this out so that we might be reminded that perseverance in faith is not the same thing as sinlessness.¹⁴

The list then moves from names to circumstances. Another reason we know this list is *not* exhaustive is because the circumstances don't correspond *only* to the names previously listed. Verse 33 begins the staccato circumstances: **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 enemies to flight.**

What we just read are nine clauses strung together without conjunctions.¹⁵ In one sense, it's "quenched power fire; escaped edge sword; weakness made strong." It's truly a "rhythmic barrage." But the circumstances were not unfamiliar. These Jewish Christians wouldn't have had a hard time lining up characters for each scenario. The lions: Daniel. The fire: Shadrach and his friends. War: David, among others. The emphasis in each, however, is the same. Each of these things were faced by faith. Whether foreign enemies, kingdoms, fire, sword, or weakness, the Lord put His people in desperate situations again and again so that they would trust in Him rather than in themselves.¹⁶

Note that *this* section is full of triumph, a theme often missed in Hebrews 11. It's deliverance after deliverance. Enoch's faith had been noted for this reason. Verses 32–34 corroborate. God can and has delivered His people when they've lived by faith.

But as you recall, that's not the whole story. Alongside Enoch was Abel. Verse 35 actually captures *both* emphases: **Women received back their dead by resurrection.** Did this happen? Consider the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. There *was* deliverance. But verse 35 goes on,

⁹ Harris, 345.

¹⁰ Potentially the more known member listed first, Harris, 346.

¹¹ Rhythmic barrage is the language of Craig Koester, *Hebrews*, 516.

¹² Harris, 344.

¹³ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 588.

¹⁴ Schreiner, 369.

¹⁵ Harris, 344.

¹⁶ Schreiner, 371.

Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release. Everyone who lived by faith *wasn't* delivered. While verses 32–34 seem to give one angle, the text seems to turn a corner.

Verses 36–38 paint the other reality, starkly. Verse 36: **and others experienced mocking and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.** With this verse, we're closer to what the Hebrews were experiencing. They'd had property seized. They'd experienced reproach and tribulations. Some of them had been imprisoned. They'd **endured a great conflict of sufferings** (Heb. 10:32–34).

Maybe you'd say one of the major causes of disappointment and disillusionment in your life has been unmet expectations. On a small scale, you anticipate a drive taking 15 minutes; and it takes 45. Or you start the cake expecting it to look one way; and it doesn't. Nor does the bookshelf. Those are unmet expectations on the smaller, less consequential scale. Those are disappointments more easily gotten over. But the disillusionment comes on more fiercely when your career expectations careen, your marriage expectations collapse, or the expectations you had for parenting are met less and less.

The same can be true for following Christ. We might assume or expect certain outcomes, maybe because we've *only* read Daniel and the den. While the history of God's people certainly leads us to believe—and expect—that God delivers, that's not necessarily *immediately*, nor is it always in the way we expect.

In fact, Jesus made clear we ought to expect something else. Jesus reminds us of the history of God's people, **they persecuted the prophets who were before you** (Matt. 5:12). He also speaks of the future, **if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you** (Jn. 15:20).

The history of God's people doesn't disagree. After mentioning mocking, scourging, chains and imprisonment, the author of Hebrews has *much* more to say about what the faith of God's people has led to. Verse 37: **They were stoned,¹⁷ they were sawn in two,¹⁸ they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword;¹⁹ they went about in sheepskins,²⁰ in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated²¹ (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.**

Historically, before *and* after Christ, the world has taken a particular posture toward those of faith. Jesus said they have. Jesus said they would. Because those that live by faith are men and women of whom the world is not worthy.

Hebrews 11 began with two examples. Abel lived by faith. So did Enoch. We asked when we considered that text, “What if we were *only* given Abel?” What if suffering is the only example of faith's outcome? Would that be accurate? Or what if we were *only* given Enoch? What if triumph were the only example of faith's outcome? What that *alone* be accurate?

No, it wouldn't. So, whether we're “glass half-empty” folks or the opposite, Abel and Enoch are a microcosm of the case here. Those of faith have conquered kingdoms, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, and received back their dead by resurrection. But also, those of faith have experienced suffering—scourging, stones, the saw, and sword.

Throughout history, God's people have lived by faith in varying conditions.

¹⁷ Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24.

¹⁸ According to tradition, this happened to Isaiah. See Schreiner, 372 and Harris, 351.

¹⁹ John the Baptist and James come to mind.

²⁰ The most primitive dress imaginable, Harris, 352.

²¹ See Moses and the people of God back in verse 25.

3. Throughout history, though God's people have lived by faith in varying conditions, they've done so in a similar way (vv. 39–40; v. 35b)

After going through character after character and outcome after outcome, verses 39–40 point us to commonality. Verse 39: **And all these, having gained approval through their faith.** Verse 2 said something similar, as something of a bookend to verse 39. Verse 2: **For by it (faith) the men of old gained approval.** Hebrews 11 goes on to say that Abel received the testimony that he was righteous (v. 4). Enoch was pleasing to God (v. 5). Abraham, certainly, by faith gained God's approval. Verse 2 declared this truth at the beginning of the chapter. Verse 39 repeats it at the end, looking back and asserting that **all these . . . gained approval through their faith.**

Verse 39 goes on, **and all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised.** Didn't verse 33 just say that some **obtained promises**? So how could they, at the *same* time, *not* receive what was promised? This particular tension has run throughout Hebrews 11. Back in verse 16, the author wrote, **all these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance.**

What are we to make of this? Simply, there are promises made and promises kept. And then there are *better* promises. That's what chapter 8 told us as well: **But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises** (8:6). In other words, yes, they obtained promises, but they did *not* obtain all that's been promised.²² In fact, the promises they received pointed forward to better ones. Noah inherited the earth, purified. Joseph's bones were buried in a land. Moses passed through the Red Sea, delivered.

But even when they received what they received, it was clear to them that there was more. Hebrews 4 made plain that *even after* Joshua entered the land promised, even after Jericho's fall, that there was something more. God's people *were* in God's place under God's rule.²³ Yet, *in the land*, they were *still* being exhorted to enter God's rest (Heb. 4:8).²⁴

Promises were made. Promises were kept. And better promises were made. The people of God continued to look forward. That's what verse 40 says: **because God had provided something better for us.** The author is saying, "There's something new *now* that the Old Testament saints awaited." To say it another way, we might read Hebrews 8 again: **for if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second** (Heb. 8:7).

Verse 40 goes on, **because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.** That doesn't mean *we* make *them* perfect; it means they're not perfected apart from our being perfected too.

To understand this, we need to recall what the book of Hebrews has said concerning this "perfection." Back in chapter 7 the author made clear that whatever this perfection is, the Levitical priesthood couldn't bring it about (Heb. 7:11). There was a certain obsolescence built into that entire framework. The first covenant wasn't faultless. That's the first point. Secondly, whatever this perfection is, Christ became it. Hebrews 5:9 gives us one of His priestly qualifications: **having been made perfect.** So, first, whatever this perfection is, the Levitical priesthood couldn't bring it about. Secondly, whatever it is, Christ became it. Third, whatever this perfection is, His having been made perfect brings with it effects upon His people. Hebrews 5:9 goes on, **having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.**

²² Schreiner, 373.

²³ See Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*.

²⁴ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 117.

What does all this mean? There's much more we could say, from Hebrews 2 and elsewhere. But when Hebrews speaks of salvation, it concerns itself primarily with our ultimate deliverance, with salvation in the future.²⁵ So, while it certainly means *more* than what can be described in a single sentence, this forward-looking salvation brought about by Christ's perfection includes full and final forgiveness, the transformation of believers, and the restoration of all that humanity lost.²⁶

They looked forward to that. Though we've received more than they did, we *too* look forward to that in fullness. Throughout history, though all of God's people have lived by faith, they've done so in a similar way. First, that means they—and we—look forward to something better. They waited for what we've received. And we wait together for more.

We're both looking forward. But secondly, we're *both* looking to that which brings this all about. How might His perfection bring about our salvation, our transformation, forgiveness, and restoration? The center of this second list (vv. 32–38) —some would say it's *essence*—is right in verse 35: **Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepted their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection.**

Though Noah might've inherited the earth—having been delivered from certain death—eventually he *did* breathe his last. Though Daniel might've been saved from the mouth of a lion, eventually his heart stopped. Abraham, though good as dead, might've lived long enough to have children. But eventually he too died. David might've been saved from Saul, from Absalom, but Peter told us in Acts that David's tomb is still with us. Moses might've been spared from Pharaoh, Rahab from the Israelites, Joshua from dying in the wilderness, but all of them did in fact die.

Should I go on? All were kept from death, to a point. But they knew they wouldn't be forever. Like us, they looked to obtain a better resurrection.

Conclusion

Recall what Jesus told the Sadducees in Luke 20 when they asked if there was such a thing. Jesus said that even the Old Testament saints believed: **that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.** His point is that in Exodus 3—though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been dead *a while*—Moses doesn't say He *was* their God. Instead, Moses said, He *is* their God—in the *present* tense. Then Jesus doubles down, continuing His answer to the Sadducees: **He is not the God of the dead but of the living** (Lk. 20:37-38).

That's why Abel, though dead, still speaks. He was a man of whom this world was not worthy. He belonged to another world. Hebrews 11 tells us he isn't alone. So, this morning, in a sense, we're breaking bread with those no longer with us. We're not prisoners of the moment. We're listening to those who've gone before us, seeing their example, seeing what God did in them, their lives testifying to us: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab (we could go on) Hannah, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Micah, Elizabeth, Mary, Peter, James, John, Barnabas, Lydia, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquilla, Apollos, Paul.

What more shall I say? Should I go on? Time would fail me.

All these lived by faith, in things hoped for, in things unseen. We do too, looking forward to what the Perfector of our faith both promised and provided. So that one day we might break bread with those who are not dead.

²⁵ Harris, 169; Schreiner, 215.

²⁶ Schreiner, 216.