

"The Road to Joy"
Hebrews 11:32-40
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Have you ever been at the top of a rollercoaster, diving tower or ski hill and wondered, "What am I doing up here?" A number of years ago at our annual adult retreat at Trout Lake camp I climbed to the top of the zipline tower. When I was standing on the ground it seemed like a great idea. Yet, as I looked down at the ground from that tower I thought, "There are a lot of other places I would rather be." Now, I didn't have to be pushed off the platform, as a couple of people have been over the years, and the ride down was actually fun, but I sure didn't like standing on top of that tower waiting to go down. So, every year since then when someone asks, "Pastor Dan, are you going on the zipline?" I politely respond, "No, I don't think I will do that today."

Friends, there maybe times when a Christian asks, "What am I doing here? Why am I trying to follow Jesus? It is just not working." Maybe those are the words or thoughts of someone who has tried to be very honest and generous in running a business, but finds he is not making any money. Or perhaps it is the feeling of a Christian parent who had tried to raise her children in the Lord but finds they don't want anything to do with church anymore. Or maybe it expresses the frustration of someone who has tried to faithfully share the great news of Jesus with her friends, but finds none of them seem interested, and some of them seem to be avoiding her now. Each of these folks may have been very excited about following Jesus at one time, but now they wonder if it is really worth it, and even ask, "What am I doing here?"

As a pastor I have to admit that from a human standpoint, following Jesus seems to work well for many, but not for everyone. For example, my friend, Joe. Ten years ago, he trusted in Jesus, became a Christian and then his life just seemed to come together. He was able to overcome his drinking problem. He and his wife, Mary, started getting along a lot better and he got two promotions at work over the next two years. He and Mary loved being part of their church and are happier now than they ever dreamed they could be.

My friend Jane has a different experience. She turned to Jesus five years ago and her life has

pretty much fallen apart since then. Her husband left her a year after she became a Christian, because he didn't want to be married to some "Jesus freak." A year after that she was diagnosed with cancer, and though her treatment seemed to have been effective, it has made it hard for her to work a full-time job, which is something that she needs to do as a single mom. She wonders, "Why should I keep trying to follow the Lord? It just doesn't seem worth it. My life was a lot easier before I became a Christian."

Folks, conversations with people like Jane are not easy. Sometimes it does seem that following the Lord brings people down a very difficult path. This morning we conclude our study of Hebrews 11 and the Faith Hall of Fame. Here in Hebrews 11:32-40 we see that sometimes people of faith have great victories in life and experience rich blessings from God. We will also see that sometimes it doesn't work that way at all. Yet, the bottom line is, no matter what circumstances we face, each of us needs to hang in there, and by God's grace, strive to trust and follow Jesus. Let's pause and pray that through God's word and by His spirit our faith would be strengthened today.

Hebrews 11:32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets- This is the writer's summary of the Old Testament after the time of Joshua. As we will see in a moment, these are men whose faith seemed to work. They experienced great blessings from the Lord. The writer names four of Israel's judges, King David, the prophet Samuel, and other prophets. It is somewhat surprising that the judges Barak, Samson, and Jephthah are listed. Each of them had what seem like significant defects in their faith. Samson had a very questionable relationship with Delilah. Jephthah made a very foolish vow. And it seems strange to highlight Barak, instead of the female judge Deborah, because in Judges 4 she clearly has a greater faith.

Why are people of mediocre faith honored in this chapter? Well, as John Calvin notes, "in every saint (meaning every Christian) there is always something reprehensible to be found.

Nevertheless, though faith may be imperfect and incomplete, it does not cease to be commended by God.”

So, the imperfect faith of these Old Testament saints became the channel through which they received great blessings from the Lord. These are individuals, **Hebrews 11:33-35a who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,** (that would be Daniel) **quenched the power of fire** (his three friends in the fiery furnace), **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.** (The Shumanite woman, for example, befriended Elisha, and the Lord enabled him to raise her son from the dead.)

These were all cases where faith really seems to work. Faith, an imperfect, but genuine faith, in the Lord enables these folks to overcome obstacles and experience what seem like great victories in life. These are some of our favorite Old Testament stories. These are people who, if they were alive today, would be giving their testimonies in front of a huge audience at a Christian conference. If they came to Chisholm Baptist Church, we would have them come up here on the platform and tell how they have seen God work in amazing ways in their life. Many people might be eager to follow the Lord if they knew it meant hungry lions could not harm them and that children who died would be brought back to life.

But... it doesn't always turn out that way. For some in the Bible, their faith didn't seem to work **Hebrews 11:35b-38 Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated - of whom the world was not worthy - wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.** It doesn't sound like much fun, does it? Who were these "others?" We catch a glimpse of some of their stories in the Old Testament, though you probably didn't hear them in Sunday School class.

Tradition says Isaiah, the prophet was sawn in two, so that probably refers to him. Yet, most of the folks who suffered in these ways are unnamed. They are anonymous. There are no exhibits in the Faith Hall of Fame in their honor. They simply have these verses which stand like the tomb of the unknown soldier, representing men and women who have suffered for following the Lord throughout the centuries. Now, these stories don't excite and encourage us as much as the others. The thought of wearing goat skins, living in caves destitute, afflicted and mistreated is not very appealing. There will not be a long line of people wanting to follow the Lord, if these are the things to which they have to look forward.

There is a striking contrast here that we must not miss. Some people of faith, according to verse 34, "escaped the edge of the sword," while others, verse 37, "were killed with the sword." This is not a contradiction. It is simply reality.

Some people who follow the Lord experience many earthly blessings; others endure great hardship. For some people, their faith in the Lord seems to work. Life is easier and better for them because they are trusting in Him. For others, however, from a human perspective, it doesn't appear their faith in Jesus is working. It seems to make life harder. They seem to experience more difficulties because they are seeking to follow the Lord. This is true for people of faith in every age - Old Testament, New Testament, the Reformation, the 21st Century.

But ultimately, there is no distinction between these two groups. They are all people of faith. **Hebrews 11:39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.**

Now, in verse 33, we are told that God's people obtained promises through faith. Yet, "What was promised" (verse 39) is different than those promises. It is *the* promise. The Lord promised and provided many blessings to His people in the Old Testament. Yet the ultimate blessing, the ultimate promise, was not received until Jesus came and accomplished the redemptive work God had planned. Indeed **Hebrews 11:40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.**

So, both King David with his magnificent kingdom and Isaiah the prophet, who was sawn in two, are commended by the Lord for their faith. And both die still waiting for the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise, Jesus Christ.

Okay, that is what the god-inspired writer of Hebrews wrote to the 1st century Christians almost 2000 years ago. So, what does God want us to learn from these words today?

1st, let me speak to those of you who think your faith is making your life better right now, today. You are experiencing many blessings from the Lord. Your health is good, you have a loving family, some great friends and you have enough money, at least for anything you really need.

#1 – Don't ever think the reason you enjoy God's blessings is because your faith is superior to that of other Christians. Remember, some of the Old Testament figures had serious defects in their faith, but still experienced great blessings from the Lord.

A teaching in some popular circles is "The Health and Wealth" gospel or "Prosperity Theology." These folks claim God wants every Christian to be experiencing great health and have plenty of money. If you are struggling with illness or have a hard time paying your bills, it must be because you don't have enough faith. This teaching often leads to an attitude where one Christian looks at another who is having a rough time in life and thinks, "Boy, I guess I have a stronger faith than she does because I have not been to the doctor in 20 years."

The bizarre nature of this teaching becomes apparent, not so much when you look at the guy sitting in front of you this morning, but when you consider Christians in other parts of the world.

Open Doors, a group that tracks Christian persecution, says that last year, 2022, 360 million Christians experienced high levels of persecution and discrimination. None of those people live in the United States. They also can identify 5898 cases where a Christian was killed, martyred, because of his/her faith, though they acknowledge the number may be higher.

For us, as American Christians, our faith is part of our lives, sometimes a very important part, other

times not so important. Yet, for people willing to die for the sake of Jesus, their faith is not part of their life. It is life itself. These believers, most of who live in Muslim or communist countries, enjoy little of God's material blessings. Yet, it would be crazy to argue that my faith is greater than theirs.

Jesus tells us that in His grace, the Father causes rain to fall on both the just and unjust. The fact the Lord is blessing you with what seems like a great life doesn't mean your faith is superior to that of others. In fact, a "good life" does not necessarily mean your faith is even pleasing to God.

#2 – If life is going well for you, make sure you are seeking to follow the Lord, not striving for comfort and convenience. I fear some Christians enjoy a very easy life, not because they are experiencing God's blessings, but rather because an easy life is their top priority.

I like the saying, "A ship is safest in the harbor, but that is not what ships are made for." If you seem to be sailing smoothly through life, maybe it's because you are staying too close to shore. Friends, the Lord calls each of us, not just pastors and church leaders, but every single Christian to live by God's grace and for His glory.

That is not easy to do. There is a lot of opposition to Biblical Christianity in our culture. There is a battle going on. But... as Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:2 we are to "endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." Being faithful to Jesus means we have to sometimes talk to someone with whom we are not very comfortable talking.

Maybe you have some new neighbors across the street who drink a lot of beer, use a lot of profanity, and play really loud music. Yet, if the Lord calls you to be His ambassador to those folks, as He may very well do, you need to step out of your comfort zone, sail out from the shore and get to know those individuals.

Being faithful to Jesus sometimes means giving money you are not sure you can spare to help someone in need or support the work of the church. Remember, it is always good to follow Jesus, but it is not always easy. And friends, if life is always easy for you, that is nice, but you better make sure you are really following Jesus.

Now, a couple of thoughts for those of you who don't feel your faith is working. You may be having a lot of struggles in life and might be wondering, "Is it really worth it to follow the Lord? I keep trying to do that, but things just seem to be getting worse." Please remember what I have said. Your problems don't necessarily mean your faith is weak. In fact, your problems may be, at least partly, because you are obeying the Lord, and you are sailing out in some rough waters. But...

#1 Make sure sin in your life is not the cause of your problems. When we disobey the Lord, when we do and say things contrary to His will, there are often natural consequences. It should not surprise us when someone who eats, drinks, and smokes too much encounters some health problems. Or if someone spends his money foolishly, it is no great mystery why there may be financial issues.

Yes, God might graciously protect us from the natural consequences of our poor choices, but not always. Maybe not even usually. Remember, when we turn to the Lord and confess our sin, God promises (1 John 1:9) to remove the guilt and shame of our sin, but not the consequences. Yet, the Lord often uses those consequences to teach us some important lessons.

We also need to remember **Hebrews 12:6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastens every son who he receives.** This indicates that if you are a believer in Jesus, the Lord may allow or even bring adversity in your life in order to get your attention or to teach you an important lesson.

Now, don't be paranoid. If you catch a head cold this week it is unlikely the Lord is discipling you. Yet, whenever you are struggling it is always a good idea to say, "Okay, Lord, I am hurting right now. If you are trying to get my attention, you have got it. Is there a sin I need to confess? Is there something else you want to teach me?" If there is, be confident our loving Father will make it clear to you what the issue is.

#2 When difficulty comes to your life, remember God promises **Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** What a marvelous verse. Friends,

if you are a Christian, if you are a believer in Jesus, God is going to use your health problems, your financial problems, your marriage problems, your school problems, what ever problems you have, to bring about His glory and your ultimate good.

That is a wonderful promise, and a reason for great encouragement. Now, it doesn't make it fun to have any of those problems, but it should give you hope. We all need to remember that God often uses hard times in our lives to make us better people, and to ultimately increase our joy.

Samuel Rutherford, a great leader of the Presbyterians in Scotland in the 1600s, wrote these words while in prison because of his faith in Jesus. "If you see a man shut in a closed room idolizing a couple of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wanted to make him truly happy you would blow out all his lamps, and then open the shutters and let in sunlight, the light of heaven." He concludes, "I pray that when God blows out my lamps, I will not curse the wind."

Friends, remember...If you are trusting and following Jesus, any temporary suffering God allows into your life, will be used to increase your ultimate joy, which is eternal joy. Allow that truth to encourage you in your darkest days. And don't curse the wind for blowing out your lamp.

Friends, whether the waters upon which you have been sailing are smooth or rough, whether your life has been basically easy or hard, don't give up. Whether you have received great blessing from the Lord, like King David, or feel like you have been sawn in two, like Isaiah, *keep trusting in the Lord.*

Stay focused on the something better that God provides for us, our magnificent salvation through Jesus Christ. Keep hoping in all the promises He has made and will fulfill. Keep striving to love God, and others as you should, and be glad that you are a Christian. Be glad that through Jesus' death and resurrection you have been made a son or daughter of God. Be glad because, though following Jesus is not always easy, it is the only road that leads to joy.