



Hebrews 11:7-16
Faith That Follows

Summary: God calls us to follow Him by faith, trusting His commands, calling, and character more than our circumstances and feelings.

Spring is coming. The weather is warming up, and you can see it out on the trails – people are getting out for a run, ride, or walk. Of course, there's a bit of hesitancy for some people because you know you probably won't be able to go as far, or as fast, as you did last fall, and you might be a little sore tomorrow, but it's beautiful out there and you're tired of being locked up inside, and it's a good kind of sweat, a good kind of sore, so you go anyway, right?

Or, maybe you know what it's like to walk into the gym knowing, this is going to be a heavy day, or a hard day, and you kind of dread it but kind of look forward to it at the same time.

That's how I think you should feel about coming to church right now. A mixture of dread and excitement. As we finish out the book of Hebrews, as you study the book of Romans, you should know – this is going to stretch me, it's going to be uncomfortable, but by the time summer comes, your spiritual beach body is going to be looking good!

You know where we are, in Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith, a biographical review of key men and women of faith encouraging us to follow the same God, the same way, today.

Well, it's that second part that makes things hurt – it's what challenges us – the realization that this isn't Bible Story Hour where you sit and are entertained. This is a workout for your soul – we read God has done through other people and then have to decide: *what about us?*

As we read about faith in Hebrews, and the difference between living in the flesh or the Spirit in Romans, God is backing you into a corner and forcing you to choose: is your life on earth a pilgrimage to a better place, or an end in itself? Are you locals and natives, or strangers and pilgrims?

Friends, God is calling us to a life of faith, based on the choice to trust God's commands, calling, and character instead of our circumstances and feelings. We'll see that unfold this morning as we look at the lives of three people, one man and one married couple, and the what it looked like for them to follow God into the unknown and unseen.

We're going to make a lot of observations about faith, so if you're taking notes, either write small, use more paper, or get a copy of the notes which are available in the app or on the website.

We start with Noah:

Hebrews 11:7 By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

The first thing I want to point out is:

1. Faith trusts God's commands. Everyone knows Noah built an ark, a really big boat with lots of animals on it. But we often forget, the whole reason for the boat was to provide a way to escape a massive flood that God sent in judgement to wipe out people.

We make cute children's toys and nursery room decorations out of it, but the ark floated in waters filled with the bodies of men and women who had rejected not only God's commands, but also the offer of salvation on the ark. It's not really a G-rated story if it you tell it the way it actually occurred.

You can read about Noah in Genesis chapter 6 and you can see that already, this early in human history, people were wandering away from God making their own moral choices about what was right and wrong and generally living in whatever way they felt best.

But 120 years before the rains came down, God came down and told Noah to build an ark, a way to escape the coming judgement. And Noah did, by faith. He trusted God's commands. But that brings us to the second thing I want to say which is:

2. Faith will lead you to do things without precedent or pattern. There had never been a flood before. God had never told anyone to build an ark before. He had to give Noah the instructions and dimensions. And Noah had to receive those instruction and follow them.

I say this because you need to know that sometimes God calls you to do things you've never done before or seen before. Now, there are boundaries to that, and we'll talk about them in a moment, but for now, allow me to make this point: sometimes, faith will lead you to do things without precedent or pattern. Don't assume God will only have you do the same things you've always done. Don't assume God wouldn't call you to do something new - that might be *exactly* the thing He's calling you to. And if He is, you need to follow.

But that's scary, huh? Because there is a part of us that wants a nice, tame, predictable faith that we can put on our calendar and schedule properly.

But God won't have it! He won't do it! If you follow Him, you have to follow His commands, and sooner or later that is going to lead you into things without precedent or pattern in your life and you'll have lean into Him even more for guidance as you grow.

3. Faith requires action. God didn't just ask Noah to *believe* a flood was coming, He called Noah to build a boat. Friend, I don't know what God sees coming your way, but I know this:

He is calling you to take real action, in the real world, in light of the spiritual things you believe because, get this: the spiritual world IS the real world.

Sooner or later, you have to take action on what you believe. For Noah that meant cutting down the first tree, and then a few more, and then a few more. He had to prove with his hands what he believed in his heart.

Friends that moment will come for you too. God will call you to do something. And you can think about it for a while. You can pray about it. You can consider what it means and how it will work out, but eventually, you have to take action.

It might even be something everyone else can see. It's pretty hard, after all, to build an ark and keep it a secret. The moment will come when you have to go public with what you believe.

And listen, I want to tell you again and again, that's neither easy nor automatic. My life is full of moments when I had to go to my wife and say, "Honey, I think this is the direction God is leading." That's not easy. Now, she makes it much easier than some, because she's an amazing woman who also wants to follow God and obey, but I'm telling you, I still know the courage it can take to say something out loud and wonder how someone else will receive it.

Seven years ago, I had to stand in front of two churches and say: I think God is leading us to partner together in something new.

That was not easy. There were questions. It wasn't something either church had been thinking about. It came seemingly out of nowhere for everyone. But I had the distinct sense that this is what God was doing, and I had to say that to my wife, to Pastor Vic, and to both churches. And then, some of you had to think about it, you had to pray about it, you had to consider it and ask questions, and then at some point you too had to decide *will we take action? Will we do this? But look at what God has done as we followed him, by faith, without precedent or pattern.*

4. Faith persists. Noah didn't build an ark over a long weekend when he had some extra time off from work. It took 120 years. That's A Long Obedience in the Same Direction¹.

And persistent faith is not always easy, even when you have clear guidance and direction from God. There are times when your faith feels sure and strong and even exciting, but then there are times when your faith feels weak and you begin to doubt, 'Did God really say?' Or, 'Does it really have to be like this?'

Friends, faith is not carved in stone, it is tested all along the way. Don't think you're doing something wrong if your faith begins to waver at times. That's normal. But hold on, because faith must persist.

¹ Eugene Peterson's famous book title.

There's an interesting example of this in the world of flying. It's known as *the point of no return*. That's actually a technical phrase meaning the point at which it is no longer possible to return to the airfield you took off from, usually because you've used up so much fuel, you've crossed the halfway point and there's no going back.

That's not such a big deal when you're flying around the United States, you can always land somewhere else, pick up some fuel, and head back to where you're going. But what if you took off from an aircraft carrier, or you're flying across an ocean? There comes a point when you've gone too far to go back and you have to keep on going, persisting, by faith, that you will eventually see the shore and a suitable place to land. Up to a certain point you can back out, but after that, you're committed and you have to press on.

Friends, that's not easy. But it's real life. It happens with pilots, it happens in surgery, it happens in marriage, it happens in your walk with God – you need faith, and you need persistent faith to press on to the end. So, if you find it hard to do that, fall back on what you already know of God's commands, His calling, and His character and look for people around you whose example you can follow – that's why we're being reminded of Noah right now.

Of course, there's something else that makes living by faith difficult, and that is:

5. Faith makes you look different and others feel judged. Again, if you're Noah you can't hide the fact that you're building an ark. And when word gets out why, everyone's going to have an opinion.

Anyone ever try to keep a low profile about your faith at work or school? Like, I'm just going to do my thing, I'm not a Bible thumper, I'm not some kind of freaky fundamentalist, I just have my convictions, and I'm trying to hold them quietly.

How does that work out? Not very well, does it? Remember, we said earlier, faith requires action and that means sooner or later what you believe on the inside is going to be exposed if you live with integrity. Because at some point they all want to do something, and if you don't do it too, they feel judged by you, or convicted by your position, *even though you never said anything to them about it.*

When Noah obeyed God's command to build the ark, (vs 7) **he condemned the world**. But it wasn't because he hated people, it was because he chose to obey God. You're going to have to make the same decision and sooner or later you will stand out too. When it happens, I hope it's not because you hate people, but just because you serve God.

OK, we've said a lot about Noah, we've got to look at others now:

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. **9** By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same

promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

In a day and age when diversity is such a hot topic, it's good for us to be reminded regularly that Christianity is not an invention of white skinned people from the American South or even Western Europe. No, it all began with brown skinned men and women from the modern Middle East and North Africa. God showed up in the life of a man living in modern Iraq and told him to go to the place we call Israel today. But, notice this: Abraham didn't know where he would wind up when God first called. So,

6. Faith trusts God's calling, then steps into the unseen and unknown. Abraham was a wandering worshipper who followed God by faith.

Friends, you need to know: God will not give you all the answers you would like to have. He will give you some. He will give you enough reasons to go. But He won't always give you as much detail as you would like and you're going to have to be OK with that.

Here's what I've learned: *sometimes you can't see what God is doing next from where you're standing now.* But if you come when He calls, He'll do exceedingly, abundantly, above all you could ever hope or imagine, *even if it hurts really, really, bad along the way.*

I met my wife at a time when I was not looking for a girlfriend. In fact, I had told God I wasn't going to pay any attention to women, and He dropped Madeleine into my life, the second-best thing that has happened to me, after Jesus.

I came to Virginia to go to seminary expecting to go back into the military full-time as a chaplain. I was supposed to be retired from Active Duty by now, living on the mission field, supported by my retirement income. Instead, God gave us the gift of being here with all of you.

None of these things were on my radar, the life I have now was not on my dream sheet, it was unknown and unseen, but it's also better than I ever planned, and I got here by following God's call – with, *I say it again, to be super clear* – a lot of pain and tears and struggle along the way. Because, it's not always easy to follow God.

It's not always easy to trust Him. You don't always see where He's going. And when the path doesn't look like the one you picked, it's easy to freak out. I don't ever, ever, want you to have the idea that following God is just this wonderfully peaceful process that you glide right along with. It's not.

Oh, there are times when it all comes together, times when you see things that amaze you, but there are also times when you freak out, but you also hold on. You trust in God's commands, His calling, and His character, instead of allowing your circumstances and your feelings to direct you. You fly by your instruments when you can't see clearly out the cockpit. It's not blind faith, you're just trusting what you cannot see.

It would be crazy to try and fly with no visibility and no instruments – that’s blind faith. But it is not foolish to fly by your instruments when you can’t see the terrain, in fact, it’s an advantage. The ability to fly without looking at the ground gives pilots a tremendous advantage and makes flight possible in all kinds of otherwise impossible circumstances. Well, spiritually speaking, your instruments for navigating life are God’s calling, His commands, and His character, and when you have questions about what you’re seeing on those instruments, you can also reach out to people around you and invite the counsel of others – they can lead you through things and talk you through the storm.

Speaking of having others in your life as you navigate by faith, we come to Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

Hebrews 11:11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

7. Faith trusts God’s character. Notice Sarah **judged Him faithful who had promised**. You have to know that when God called Abraham to leave Iraq he and Sarah had no kids. And they should have, they wanted kids, but they could not have them. Some of you know exactly what they felt because you feel it yourself. Some of you want to have kids and God just hasn’t let that happen yet.

There’s a couple I pray for almost every time their names come up because they’re good people, wonderful people, kind hearted, generous servants, and they want kids but have not been able to have any. And they’ve been through so many heartbreaking things and still have none. I hope the day comes when all that changes. I pray for that day. I will weep with joy if it comes. And I have hope that it might, in part because of what I see here with Sarah and Abraham.

God told them it would happen and Sarah thought it was impossible, she actually laughed about it when she first heard, but part of her was still willing to see, if maybe, it could be true. *She believed it was the kind of thing God could do.* And eventually, again if you know the story, it wasn’t immediately – and mistakes were made along the way - but eventually the day came, and she had Isaac whose name means, literally, laughter.

Christian, when your circumstances don’t make sense, hold onto what you know about God’s character, **judge Him**, and His promises **faithful**. Things might not make sense immediately, but notice:

8. Faith receives what is necessary along the way. **By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed.** She didn’t start off with it, but she *received* it in God’s timing as she followed Him and trusted Him. Hudson Taylor, the famous early missionary to China was known for saying, “God’s will, done God’s way, will not lack God’s supply.” When you look around your life and circumstances and say, ‘this is impossible,’ you might be right.

But what does God want to give you if you're willing to go, if you're willing to trust that He will provide what you need in order to follow Him? Now to be clear, that's not saying go do your own thing and ask God to bless you. No. We're talking about *following*, by faith, and receiving along the way. My friends, *you will get to wherever God wants you to be if you let Him lead and provide along the way.*

Of course, the secret to remember is that He's not ultimately leading you to blessings on earth, but to His home in heaven. Notice what we read next:

Hebrews 11:13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

9. Living by faith is easier when we remember this world is not our home. God's ultimate goal was not for Noah to be a sailor, or Abraham to live in Israel, or Sarah to have a baby. The ultimate goal was to bring them home to Heaven and use them to point as many of us as possible in the same direction.

That's why some of your prayers are not answered. That's why things don't always work out. It doesn't mean you're asking for the wrong things, or in the wrong way – you might be - but it's also possible that for some reason, you're not going to get what you want, but you're going to get what you need – not a city on earth, but the eternal city in heaven.

Faith can feel lonely. Faith can feel empty at times, because it's operating on a different time horizon. Faith accepts that on this side of eternity, not everything is settled and not every wrong is righted. As Pastor Jon Courson said, "If you take eternity out of the equation, the whole life of faith seems like a bad joke."²

Of course the really, really, hard question to ask yourself is: is that OK? Is that enough? Is that what I really want? Because,

10. Faith has a way out but declines it. Noah didn't have to build a boat. Abraham didn't have to leave Iraq. Sarah didn't have to keep trying to have children. But these men and this woman chose faithfulness over comfort and ease. They trusted that God's way really would produce a better result. So too with you.

God is not going to force you to have faith, no one can. You either believe or you don't. Which means, there is always a way to turn back, and at times it's going to feel really, really tempting. You'll actually take a few steps toward the door, maybe even put your hand on

² Courson, 1495.

the knob. But when you do, the Holy Spirit will be speaking to you, reminding you of God's calling, His commands, and His character.

It is possible to turn back, but I'm telling you from experience, God, in His grace, makes it really, really, hard to do. And you should know: there's no comfort that comes from turning back and, there's no release from the pain and difficulty either.

And that's all you're really looking for anyway, isn't it? It's not that you've given up on God. It's not that you don't believe. It's that life hurts. And you want the pain to stop. You want the good to come. You want a breather. You want a promise. My friend, I get it. You're not wrong. You're not a bad human being. I don't want you to hurt any more than you have to.

But remember what we said – sometimes life, spiritually speaking, is like that first run back on the trails after a long winter. Sometimes it's like the heavy day at the gym – it's going to hurt, but you're also getting stronger. You're getting better. And you're willing to endure some discomfort today for a better tomorrow. Well, 'today' is this life, and 'tomorrow' is forever.

God led Noah, Abraham and Sarah through some very difficult times, and they could have turned back, but they [desire\[d\] a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.](#)

Is that what you want? Is that your ultimate goal, to be in eternal relationship with God in heaven? If so, you will be a pilgrim and stranger on earth, but [God is not ashamed to be called your God and He has prepared a place for you.](#) That language should sound familiar to some of you because Jesus said something very similar to the disciples in the Upper Room on the night before He was crucified, that He was [going to prepare a place for them.](#)

Do you believe it? Do you receive it? Do you base your life upon it? Then now is the time to prove it. Come forward, in just a moment, by faith, and take hold of the elements of communion, reminders of who God is, His calling, His commands, and His character, and receive them, by faith as a declaration that yes, I believe, and I want to follow, even when it's hard. Declare: my heart is set on Heaven, and I believe Jesus is the way.

Let's pray.

Ultimately, the question underneath all our questions about faith is: can I really trust God?



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Hebrews 11:7-16 Faith That Follows

Summary: God calls us to follow Him by faith, trusting His commands, calling, and character more than our circumstances and feelings.

- Which of the following points about faith is hard for you? Which do you feel comes more easily than others? Which have grown through and discovered already?
 - 1. Faith trusts God's commands.
 - 2. Faith will lead you to do things without precedent or pattern.
 - 3. Faith requires action.
 - 4. Faith persists.
 - 5. Faith makes you look different and others feel judged.
 - 6. Faith trusts God's calling and steps into the unknown and unseen
 - 7. Faith trusts God's character.
 - 8. Faith receives what is necessary along the way.
 - 9. Living by faith is easier when we remember that this world is not our home.
 - 10. Faith has a way out but declines it.
- What difficult, faith-stretching things has God called you to do? Have you seen how it turned out yet, or are you still in the middle?
- One commentator noted: "If faith can see every step of the way, it's not faith" And when on to say, "Men spend the greater part of their lives putting limits on the power of God."³ Do you agree, or disagree? How have you experienced yourself or others putting limits on the power of God instead of walking by faith?
- Because of Noah's faith, his children and their families survived the flood. Because of Sarah and Abraham's faith, millions of descendants were eventually born through the ages. How has the faith of someone else had an impact on you?
- When have you been tempted to turn back from following God through a faith-testing time of difficulty? What kept you going?
- Read John 14:1-6 and Revelation 21:22-22:5 – what do you learn about the city that God has prepared for those who love Him (Heb 11:10,16)?

³ Barclay, 144.