

GROUNDED HOPE

Hebrews 11:17–22 • Pastor Luke Herche

Our sermon text for this morning is Hebrews Chapter 11, verses 17 through 22, so please turn with me in your Bibles to Hebrews Chapter 11. And I'll begin reading a verse 17 but before I do that, let's pray together. Let's pray:

*Father, we come before you to hear from you, to hear your Word, to hear your truth, and to see life better in light of it. Psalm 119 says your Word is like **a lamp to our feet**, which is to say that the Word of God sheds light on our surroundings so that we understand how to live and how to walk in this world. And so we pray, Father, that you would use your word this morning to shed light on us, on our hearts, and on the path that is laid out before us. Father, pour out your Spirit to that end. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.*

Hebrews 11, beginning with verse 17, this is God's Word:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Well, hope is something that we need every day, right? Hope allows us to keep moving through difficulties, suffering, temptation, and even just boredom. It seems pretty obvious that our day is no exception. And yet, there tends to be various extremes when it comes to hope. Most people fall somewhere in the middle, but the caricatures are familiar. One extreme is an ungrounded hope. This is the stuff of Hallmark cards. "Everything is going to be OK. Tomorrow is going to be a brighter day today anything is possible. Together we can change the world. Things won't be this way forever. You have a place in this world, and you are strong enough. You are smart enough and you already are what you're looking for." It's the kind of stuff that we like to hear, and context does make a big difference, but if we think too hard

about some of those statements we might come up with a few questions and maybe even then end up on the other side.

The other side is a kind of grounded hopelessness, though many just call it realism. "Those Hallmark messages by themselves, they float; they're not grounded in reality. How do you know everything is going to be OK and is anything really possible? Can we change the world because this world has been a mess for thousands of years? What makes you think it can change? And yes, things won't always be this way, but they could get worse. Yes, everyone has a place in this world, but it may not be the place that you want."

Now I know some of you are thinking, "Luke, now you're just being a pessimist." Well then, you'll be happy to know that I don't think either of these ways is a good way to go. Neither ungrounded hope nor a grounded hopelessness is rooted in the Gospel. One is a false hope, and of course, the other is no hope at all. We don't want to land either in kind of a cheery optimism that sees only lollipops and roses, nor a depressing realism that only takes account of the Evening News. No, there is another way.

Hebrews chapter 11 is verse after verse of people who acted on their faith. By faith Abel offered up a sacrifice. By faith, Enoch walked with God. By faith, Noah built an ark. So we had picture after picture of people who lived, who walked by faith. And what shaped their lives was a grounded hope.

They didn't have an overly cheery view of life, but neither were they pessimists just waiting for the roof to fall in. No, they had a grounded, rooted, confident hope even in the midst of terrible trials and difficulties. That hope is what we're going to look at this morning. We're going to look at this grounded hope under 3 points, and if you're to walk by faith in the midst of trials, you need this grounded hope, and to have that you must: 1. Know the resurrection promises of God, 2. Know the God of the promised resurrection, and 3. Enter death in resurrection hope.

First, know the resurrection promises of God.

If you're in the midst of a trial, a struggle, a temptation, how do you get through? Well, some people just might say "Well, suck it up! Yes, things are bad, but what do you expect?" And this may have a religious bent, we live in a fallen world of course it's hard, or a secular bent ("Evolution doesn't care about you, so just get used to it."). And others might say, "Well, do something about it! Demand your best life now! If life isn't going your way, it's because you aren't taking charge." Again, this might have a religious bent ("If you only pray hard enough or or have enough faith, things will go

your way.”), or it might have a secular bent (“You determine your own destiny. You make your own future. Go out and get it.”).

What we're going to see is that there is another way through trials that avoids both a Stoic resignation on the one hand, and demanding the world conform to your wishes on the other. That is, there is a way of being genuinely hopeful that is neither groundless nor grounded in me in my ability. There is a hope for the future that is grounded in the promises of God. Now in order to have that hope, you have to know the promises of God. So think about Abraham; he knew the promises of God. Verse 17 calls him **he who had received the promises**. And of course, God had given Abraham a ton of promises. Just read through the Book of Genesis and it lists promise after promise. God promised to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great to bless all nations through him. God promised him a land, a home. God promised him children as many as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. And of course, God's greatest promise was that he would be Abraham's God. And Abraham cherished those promises. He knew them, and he reasoned in light of them. We'll see that in verse 19 Abraham considered, and his considering was both in light of God, person, and God's promises. Paul tells us that Abraham clung to those promises in Romans chapter four. We read, **In hope he [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.** [Romans 4:18-21]. So this is where we have to start. If you want a grounded hope, you need to know the promises of God to you. So how can you do that? Well, for starters (maybe this is obvious, but it needs to be said), read the Scriptures. That is where we find the promises of God. Search the Scriptures, read them, know them, memorize them. This is God's Word to us. The Bible is filled with promises.

Now it is true that not every promise in the Bible is to you, and so you need to read with discernment. Sometimes, we get into trouble because we assume that everything in Scripture applies to us directly. And so God promised Abraham that kings would come from him. Does that mean that our kids are going to be earthly rulers? Or God promised the Israelites manna from heaven, and so we sit around waiting for kind of a divine Grubhub delivered to our front door. Or God promised the Israelites in Jeremiah 29:11 “welfare and not evil, a future and a hope,” and we think that that means that our tomorrow will be better than our today. The context of such verses will show us otherwise, and so we need to be discerning. We need to be sensitive to the movement in God's plan in history. And yet, we can't be dismissive. All Scripture is written for our instruction, says First Corinthians 10 verse 11. If you

struggle with understanding which promises apply to you and how they apply to you, well, ask someone. Ask someone older in the faith. We don't have to figure everything out on our own. That is why God gave us the church.

And so, know the promises of God in Scripture, know how they apply to you. And of course, if you want to know how they apply to you, ultimately, look to Jesus. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, **all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus]**. The promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus, specifically in His incarnation, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, Pentecost, and His return. See in the Incarnation, Jesus became God with us, Immanuel. In His death He purchases forgiveness for our sins. In His resurrection, Jesus receives the promise of life eternal. In His ascension, He receives authority over all the Earth. In Pentecost, He receives the gift of the Spirit and then pours that gift out on us again, giving us His powerful presence in our midst. In His return, He will judge the world, put down all oppressors, vindicate His people, and make all things new. See, the promises of God are "yes" in Christ. So if you want to not just know them, but know that they are for you, you need to look to Jesus and believe in Him.

And let me just note a couple of specific promises that that give us hope; that drive our hope. Now, some of them I've already mentioned: the promise of Jesus' presence. Jesus is present not just with us, but in us. It's also then a promise of our sanctification. Fighting sin can feel hopeless at times. But Jesus promises that if we abide in Him, and He with us, we will bear much fruit. We have hope of overcoming sin because of Jesus' work in us by His Spirit. And there's the promise of the new creation, which has begun now in us, and so again gives us hope of overcoming sin. We are new creatures in Christ. But it will come to its fullness in the future on the last day, when Jesus returns to make all things new. And this means however bad life is, we do know it will get better. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. It may get worse before it gets better. In fact, we may die, but we know that death is not the end. We have the promise of resurrection. And that is really the great promise: all things made new. Our bodies will be made new, our souls will be made new. Maybe you're discouraged that your body is breaking down, that you can't do the things you used to be able to do. You have the promise of resurrection. Maybe you have watched loved ones die year after year, and you feel discouraged and alone. You have the promise of resurrection. See, these are the things that no Hallmark card can answer, so there's no possibility of a generic "everything will be alright" theology. But we want more, I think instinctively, and also know that there must be more than "well just suck it up, life is hard" theology. And that more is the Resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is a promise for all who believe in Him that we too will rise on the last day. As Paul puts it in First Corinthians 15, **But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.** [1

Corinthians 15:21;23]. And of course, you can even just begin to think about the Resurrection and realize that it changes everything. Time is relativized by eternity. Death is relativized by life. Pain is relativized by eternal joy.

But you might think, "Well okay, these promises (the promise of resurrection), it seems too good to be true." Which brings us to our next point: know the resurrection promises of God, and know the God of the promised resurrection.

Abraham was tested by God. God had given him promises, promises that revolved around his son, Isaac. God's promises of making Abraham a great nation, of giving him descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and making his name great, they all depended upon Isaac. And then God tests him. He commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Now, I know where we normally go with this. We get into kind of the moral issue when we think, "How could God ask such a thing?" and "How could Abraham believe in the God who would ask such a thing?" And while those questions are fair and do have answers (though maybe not the answers that would satisfy you), they also miss the point. You see, the point is in the tension between God's command and God's promise. God had said, **"Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."** (Hebrews 11 verse 18). The promises would be fulfilled through Isaac. And then God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. One old Puritan commentator put it like this; he said, "In this case, what might one think? Here is a promise and a commandment that seemed to thwart one another: the promise that from Isaac should descend the blessed seed, the commandment that Isaac should be offered for a burnt offering before he had any seed. What now might Abraham think? To sacrifice Isaac is to disannul God's promise. To refuse to sacrifice him was to disobey God command. You see, Abraham was between a rock and a hard place. "Do I undercut the promise of God or do I disobey the command of God?" It seems as if he must do one or the other. It seems as if there is no good option. And we often get ourselves into all kinds of philosophical quandaries like this, and the answer almost always as it was for Abraham, was remember the person of God. Remember who God is. That is, if the promises of God are the grounds of our faith, the person of God is the prop. The person of God is what enables us to believe the promises.

And we've seen this already in Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 11, **By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.** What was it that enabled Sarah to believe the promise, as outlandish as it was, that she, a post-menopausal woman, would have a child? She considered Him faithful who had promised. We find that the same word in our text this morning in verse 19 that Abraham considered. He considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead. See, what was the way out of this quandary for Abraham, he had a choice between undercutting God promises or disobeying God command. Well, what did he do? He considered the

person of God; he considered who God was. If he obeyed, thus killing the Child of Promise, God could raise Isaac and still fulfill His promises. God was able.

And repeatedly in Scripture, the power of God is mentioned as a prop of our faith; that the power of God propped up the faith of Daniel's three friends. They faced being thrown into the fiery furnace, you may remember. And they said in Daniel Chapter 3, **"If this be so [if you throw us into the furnace], our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."** [Daniel 3:17-18]. They knew that God was able. God might choose not to save them, but if so, that would be according to God's wisdom and plan, but He was able to save. Nothing could stop Him if it was according to His wise plan for them. Even Sarah when she initially laughed at the thought of having a child in Genesis Chapter 18, God says to Abraham, **Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.** [Genesis 18:14]. It was said in the New Testament to Mary of her cousin Elizabeth, echoing these words about Sarah in Luke chapter one, **And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.** [Luke 1:36-37]. The disciples marvel when Jesus says it is hard for rich people to enter heaven and they say, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus responds in Matthew 19, **With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.** [Matthew 19:26]. Even Jehoshaphat, when one of the Kings of Israel, when an army came against Judah, he prayed in 2 Chronicles 20 verse 12, **For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.** Jehoshaphat believed in the power of God. Of course, Paul said of God that He **is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,** [Ephesians 3:20]. God is able to do more than we can even imagine.

So if you think about the promises of God and they just seem too outlandish, meditate on the person of God. Meditate on the things that He has done and can do. Meditate on His faithfulness. And of course, this certainly includes His power; the one who made the stars can keep His promises; but there's the whole character of God as well. God is faithful. As Sarah saw, God is good. As Scripture reminds us, God is wise, God is loving. And this is important whenever we struggle with obedience to God's commands. Or when we struggle with some providence in our lives and we wonder "What's going on? Why is God allowing this?" We need to remember the character of God. God is wise: He knows what is really best for us; He knows better than we do what we need. God is loving: He wants what is really best for us and His love is a perfect love. He's not in this to use us and move on to the next person; He doesn't need us in any way. He loves us just because He loves us because that is in

His character to do. And God is powerful: He is able to give what is really best for us, and so we can trust Him. We can trust Him in the hard times; God knows what is best for you, He wants what is best for you, He is able to give what is best for you. And we can trust Him with the difficult commands; this is best for you or God would not have commanded it. And so we need to know the resurrection promises of God and know the God of the promised resurrection. Know who He is, know His person, know His character. These things don't just happen, of course, we need to meditate on the person and the promises of God. Meditate on them. Consider as Sarah and Abraham did. Mull them over. Hide them in your heart, as David says. And of course, this takes time and effort and energy. You don't grow in the Christian life simply by existing, you grow by meditating on the truths of Scripture.

And you grow by acting on them. Which brings us to our last point: know the resurrection promises of God, know the God of the promised resurrection, and enter death in resurrection hope.

Now by nature, we don't like death, and that's good. We don't like pain or sadness, discomfort or awkwardness. We don't like loss and shame and weakness and poverty. And so, we avoid such things like the plague. The problem is life is full of such things and the right way forward is often to enter them in hope. Abraham was called to do that in a dramatic way, sacrifice your son. It meant obviously the death of Isaac, but also to Abraham the loss of his beloved child and the loss of God's promise from a human perspective. But we see the same thing with Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. Each man faced his death with hope. Isaac and Jacob blessed their children and grandchildren, while they themselves faced death. They knew that their death would not nullify the promises of God. Joseph went so far as to instruct his family to take his bones to the Promised Land after the Exodus. And what is amazing in verse 22 is the word or phrase "made mention of." that Joseph made mention of the Exodus. One commentator points out that this is actually a word for "remember." But how could Joseph remember the Exodus before it happened? Because he was remembering God's promise. And even in death he wanted to participate in that fulfillment. Even in death, we expect fulfillment. Abraham considered that God was able to raise the dead. Isaac, Jacob and Joseph knew that their death would not undercut the promises of God.

And yet, of course, it's not Abraham or Isaac or Jacob, or Joseph that ultimately teaches us that life comes in and through death, but it's Jesus. And it's not just that life returns after death, as in the case of Isaac who almost dies but then lives, or even in the case of someone like Lazarus who is a guy in Scripture who did die, but was brought back to life again, because both Isaac and Lazarus and a handful of others, they came bac to life. But it was just that, this life. Ordinary, routine, everyday life with morning breath and hangnails. But that was not the case with Jesus. When Jesus

rose from the dead, it was to a whole new life. His body was not just raised but transformed by the Spirit. He came to know a life He had not known before. For Jesus, life came through death, new life, resurrection life.

Now the truth is that most of our efforts to avoid hard things in life actually negate the good things. By shying away from anything that smells like death. We actually avoid life. See, we find resurrection through death. And so, only as we are willing to enter into hard conversations and give up our time for someone else, or put to death our sinful desires, and sometimes saying no to legitimate desires, and so experience a mini death, only then do we experience life. See, entering death means living unafraid to enter into the hard things and knowing that, because of our union to the resurrected Christ, that life is just on the other side of those hard things. And so we admit our folly, to find wisdom in the Cross. We accept shame now for glory that is to come. We embrace weakness in the hope of resurrection power. We experience suffering and find joy in communion with our Father. We love others sacrificially to give life to them. And because all of this, because for those in Christ, life comes through death. And as we enter into death, as we put sin to death by saying "no" to sinful desires, as we die to our agenda by serving others, as we face sadness and are willing to enter into it, we look around for life. We keep our eyes open for the life that God will bring. One author, Paul Miller, talks about various ways that we look for resurrection, and we often look only for a change in my circumstances, as if "If God doesn't change my circumstances, then God is not at work." But that is just one of the many ways God is bringing life out of death. As Paul the Apostle suffered in jail, Christ was proclaimed and the guards came to know Christ through Paul. His circumstances didn't get any better, but God was working life through him to make Christ known and to draw Roman soldiers to himself. God's working resurrection may mean growth in Christ, it may mean joy in Christ, it may mean the worship of Christ either for me or for others. When we face death and enter trials with an eye toward resurrection, we may not receive Isaac back from the dead, but we will see God at work in these ways for His glory and for our good. And all in the hope of the fullness of the resurrection to come. So we keep our eyes looking forward for the life that is to come.

And so, unlike the realists, we don't have to face death without hope. But unlike Hallmark Christianity, we don't have to just expect everything to get better and better every day and in every way. We can take an honest look at hard things in life. We can even enter them in obedience to God out of love for others, and through that we will find life as it was meant to be. To live with a grounded hope, then it means to know the resurrection promises of God, to know the God of the promised resurrection and to enter death in resurrection hope entering the hard things, knowing that God will work life according to His wise plan in His timing for His glory and for our joy.

Let's pray,

Our Father, we thank you for the resurrection of Jesus. We thank you that you did not abandon Him to the grave, but you raised Him from the dead, so that we might have life in Him, life now, by the Spirit, life to come at the Resurrection. Father, help us to keep our eyes open for resurrection, for life given by your Spirit in the here, and in our hope to come. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.