

WALK IN FAITH

Hebrews 11:32–40 • Pastor Luke Herche

Turn with me in your Bibles if you would, to Hebrews Chapter 11. We're going to read the tail end of that chapter at this point, David read the first 31 verses, we're going to read the last portion, which will be our sermon text for this morning. But before we read that, let's pray together.

Our Father, we do thank you for your word and for your truth, and we pray for your wisdom and for your Spirit to work within us, to teach us, to grow us, to challenge us, to change us, to transform us, and conform us to the image of your son Jesus. And so we pray, Father, that you would be at work now through your word, by your Spirit, in our hearts, to your glory. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Hebrews 11, beginning in verse 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— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, 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. 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. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

There are differences between a pilgrim and a tourist. One historian, Peter Brown once said that "Pilgrims go on their journeys to make themselves worthy, worthy of the sacred presence they will experience at their destination. Tourists expect an experience worthy of their time, their money and their energy." So he says, "Whereas the Pilgrim seeks a self-worth of the experience, the tourist seeks an experience worthy of the self." There is an ever-present danger in the Christian life of seeing

ourselves as tourists rather than pilgrims; of thinking we are on vacation and not a pilgrimage; of seeking to get as much as we can out of the present age rather than keep our eye on the good things of the age to come. While our writer has been encouraging us to walk by faith to the walk of faith, to see life as a pilgrimage headed toward the heavenly promised land, we are on a journey that the journey of faith, the pilgrimage of faith, the walk of faith. It's not a vacation, it's not a tour, it's a pilgrimage; we're headed somewhere, we have a destination, and we're not there yet. Scripture encourages us to this walk by faith and not by sight. It doesn't mean we ignore the things around us; we don't ignore the seen things, but we qualify them, we locate them, we place them in their proper perspective seeing things are relativized by the unseen. It's not that we walk around with our eyes closed, but faith is the controlling perspective on life. We walk by faith, not just by sight. We're going to see that play out in three ways in our text this morning. To walk in faith means to fight in faith, to lose in faith, and to wait in faith. And so that this pilgrimage that ran involves fighting and losing and waiting.

So what does it look like to walk in faith? First, it looks like fighting in faith. Fight in faith.

The language of fighting comes and goes in popularity in the Church. Of course, it's biblical language rooted in the Old Testament, but transformed in the new. Paul talks about fighting the "good fight of faith" [1 Timothy 6:12], and he refers to the Christian life as a "battle" and sometimes a "competition" or a "race" or even a "boxing match." And the point of that imagery is always, at least in part, is that there is a struggle. The Christian life is not easy. Sometimes people confuse grace and easy. Grace is free, but the Christian life is not easy. We have an enemy in the Christian life. In fact, we have enemies: our own hearts desire what is wrong, The Devil wants to lead us astray, and the world and its systems make that the path of least resistance. We must fight the world, our flesh and the devil. This battle can feel imposing, it can feel threatening, even overwhelming at times. It can feel impossible to come out on top, like the game is rigged and the house always wins. Sometimes we turn to the resources at hand, "I just need to try harder, I just need to find the right system, the right program, the right therapy and then everything will be OK." But when that fails, something snaps in our hearts, and we give up and give in. "Why bother fighting sin? I mean, it's a hopeless cause after all. If God wants me to stop, He'll make it happen." We get the hope beat out of us and we set our eyes on the present, "I just need to get through the day. What good does tomorrow do anyway?" So we turn to manipulation, or self-medication to just make it through this moment.

As we've already said, the writer this morning wants to encourage us to walk by faith, which means to fight by faith, not fight in our own strength, and not give up, roll over and play dead, but fight by faith. And he encourages us to do that by pointing to others who have done the same thing, who fought the good fight of faith. First, he

starts with names; people we know, people whose stories we can read about in the Old Testament. Look at verse 32, he says, **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.** He's bringing the argument of Chapter 11 to a conclusion, and he realizes that he can't spend time on every "Hero of the faith" and so he just names a few more. He doesn't go into their stories and so I'm not going to go into their stories either. You can go and read them in the books of Judges and Samuel and Kings. And if you do that, you'll notice that these people are a mixed bag; they are flawed heroes; these are not perfect men, not even close. They made a lot of bad decisions. But it's encouraging to see that God remembers their faith. It's encouraging because I make a lot of bad decisions, and I hope that God remembers not those decisions, but my faith as well. And then the writer begins to say what these, and what others did by faith starting in verse 33, he says, **who [referring back to those men] through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, 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.** And this is a kind of an incredible list of victories! You can find them all in the Old Testament. The judges conquered kingdoms, the kings enforced justice, person after person obtained promises. Daniel stopped the mouths of lions when he was thrown into the lions' den. His three friends were tossed into a furnace and quenched the power of the fire. David escaped the edge of the sword on more than one occasion. All were made strong out of weakness because well, of course that is what we are as human beings, we are weak, but God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Two women in the Old Testament received back their dead by resurrection. 1. A widow of Zarephath received her son by the hand of Elijah and the other, a woman of Shunem, received her son by the hand of Elisha.

Notice that most of these examples, not all of them, but many of these examples here are battle type examples. And when thinking about the exhortation then, for us to walk by faith as they walked by faith, we need to answer two questions, which is "what is the battle?", and "how do we fight it?" And the first question is important, because sometimes Christians can co-opt God's promise of victory for any personal battle that is before them. So, you'll hear people say things like, "Well, I, I know I'm going to get an A on this test because God is with me." And you think, "Really? I'm not so sure, that's the way it works." Or, more seriously, "I know I'm going to come through this battle with cancer because God is with me." Well, maybe, but maybe not. The battle that we fight is really the battle for faith. It's the battle to keep believing in the person and the promises of God, and then to step out, believing those promises and living as if they are really true, regardless of how things turn out in the present. And so, you study hard for your test, but you know that whether you succeed or whether you fail, God will be with you, He will draw nearer, He will care for you to the end, and you will rise from the dead on the last day, which means that

my ultimate destiny does not hinge on this test. It doesn't have power over me, because I'm resting in God and His providence, in His care, and not in how well I do on this exam. And so, I fight cancer going through test after test, undergoing chemotherapy in the hopes of pulling through, but knowing that, whether I live or die, I belong to the Lord. My life is in His hands; death does not have the final word. And so I don't live in fear of death, but I fight. By faith, I believe in God and trust in His promises. The battle is the battle to believe, to believe in the person and the promises of God, and then to live in light of who God is and what he has promised.

So that's the "what" of the battle, what about the "how"? How do we fight by faith? You know, in all of these cases, in all of the Old Testament cases, all of the examples that we've read about, these people are active, and we must say that the daily battle of faith is not passive. Even Daniel, who was simply thrown to the lions' den, you might think, "Well, what did he do?" He looked to God. He trusted in God. His faith was active in prayer. We see that the very reason he's there is because Daniel was a Man of Prayer. David's faith was active in fighting battles and looking to God for the victory. The two women were active and looking to God's servants Elijah and Elisha to do for them what only God could do through them. And I've said many times before that the way to think about the activity of faith is really twofold. It's as active dependence and dependent activity. We step out in faith first in active dependence. We actively rely on God through prayer, through the reading of His Word, through dependence on the Spirit and on the body of Christ. We look to God through the means that He is given to give the victory. That is active dependence. But then there's dependent activity. We don't simply pray and wait., we also obey. We do what God has called us to do, dependent upon His Spirit. And so, Psalm 127: **Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain** [Psalm 127:1]. But that doesn't mean you don't build; it just means that you do so consciously dependent upon your Father. Jesus says, **apart from me you can do nothing** [John 15:5]. That doesn't mean you do nothing, it means you do something while abiding in Christ consciously dependent upon Him. So the fight of faith means to pray and obey and leave the victory to God, knowing that we serve a God who can even raise the dead if it comes to that, which means our victory is secure.

Though it doesn't always seem that way, which brings us to our next point. What does it look like to walk in faith? Well, it looks like to fight in faith, but also to lose in faith.

Now few people like to lose, in fact, some people hate it. You know those folks; they get angry when they lose. Some can compete hard and play hard and still lose well, but others not so much. The Christian faith, however, is a faith for losers. I know that doesn't sound very nice, but let's look at the text and see what I mean. Look at the middle beginning in the middle of verse 35 to verse 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. Now, if you read verses 33—35 and stopped in the middle of verse 35, you could end up with a very skewed understanding of Christianity. That's the way some people think of the Christian life, "It's all victory, better and better, every day in every way. Everything always goes your way because God is on your side." Well, I hate to break it to you, but reality check right, that that's just not true. So our writer lets the other shoe drop: torture, mocking, flogging, chains, death by every horrific way imaginable, homelessness. Abraham spent much of his life wandering from place to place. Men like David and Elijah spent much of their lives on the run. John the Baptist was beheaded. James, the brother of John, was killed with the sword. Tradition tells us that most of the apostles met a gruesome end. For a religion that says God is on your side, people sure had it hard. I don't have time here to explore the whole problem of evil, but I do want to note this: Christianity has never been shy about the reality of evil. In fact, suffering is seen as a key part of the Christian life.

Why would that be? Well, because that is the path of Jesus. He suffered unto victory, He died, and then rose. He bore the cross and now wears the crown from every earthly metric, Christ was a loser in this life. He had a following for a bit, but He drove most of them away with His difficult teaching. He was left with a core of 12 in the end, and one of them betrayed Him, one denies Him, the rest run away. His bid for Messiah, whom everyone thought would be a victorious military leader who would overthrow the Romans was a complete failure once the Romans nailed Him to a cross. But God brings victory out of, in this case, seeming human defeat. God does promise victory for all His children. He does promise victory over every evil. One day, every trial will be done. One day, every temptation will be no more. One day, every enemy will either be put down or transformed into a friend. One day every mourning mother will receive back her children from death. One day, but not yet. Suffering comes before victory, and this is the time of trial. We don't want it, we don't invite it, we don't seek it out, but we do endure.

And to that end, verse 35 can actually be easily misunderstood. It says, **Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.** And we might misunderstand this, as "Their torturers were ready to let them go, but they just refused and wanted to keep being tortured." But really, what's going on here is their release was contingent on their turning away from the faith. If they would deny the true God, they could go free. It was released upon such conditions that they refused. Why? Because they were looking forward to something better than release. They were looking forward to the resurrection. But as Paul puts it, first, we suffer with Christ that we might be glorified with Him. First death, then resurrection.

And think about how this changes every trial you undergo. You will face every trial in faith knowing two things: First as you suffer with Christ, you are united to Christ by faith, so you suffer with Him. He endured the curse of this age and the consequences of sin, you are enduring the curse of this age and the consequences of sin. Now, He did that completely and in a substitutionary way, you do that partially, and in union with Him. But make no mistake, all of our suffering is in union with Christ. If you endure in faith, it will actually draw you closer to Jesus. Your suffering is purposeful.

Now that may sound callous and cold, but it can also be liberating. Think about it this way: I don't know what you've been through, right, how can I say it is purposeful? Well, what are the options? How much worse is your suffering if it is pointless? If you had the option of meaningless suffering or suffering that actually led someplace good, which would you choose? Well, God can use the suffering in your life for good. Your suffering with Christ plays a role in your being conformed to the image of Christ. How can you become like Christ if you don't suffer with Christ? How can you become like the Man of Sorrows if you do not experience sorrow? And so, you suffer with Christ, united to Him by faith.

The second thing to know is that your suffering will end. Christ rose and you will rise. This is not the end of the story. Those who refuse to accept release did so, so that they might rise to a better life. This is not the end. Christ suffered and rose. We suffer and will rise. I don't know how many times I've said that. Sometimes I worry that you might get tired of hearing it, but God keeps saying it, so I guess I should too. And we are so prone to forget, aren't we? Every time we rage against our troubles, we forget, "I suffer with Christ, and I will rise with Christ." Every time we complain about the inconveniences of life, we forget why, "I suffer with Christ and I will rise with Christ." Every trial, large and small, can draw you closer to Jesus, and will end at His return. Your suffering is purposeful and temporary. You can lose in this life in faith, knowing that victory will come at the resurrection.

You can fight in faith and you can lose in faith. And third, you can wait in faith.

Waiting is a struggle. Waiting is a struggle for many of us at least. I was in line with one of my sons the other day and there were maybe three people in front of us in the line, and he jokingly said, "Oh no, I forgot my phone. What am I going to do?" And he was joking, but you know, this idea that we might have to sit and wait is a challenge. Now I'm sure waiting has always been a struggle for some, but we've taken this inability to a whole new level, right? With our ability for constant distraction, we never need to wait, we just distract. When some of us were kids, do you remember mailing away for something? The delivery time was 6 to 8 weeks. Well, I've gotten things from Amazon the next day without even paying for next day delivery. It just happens. That kind of instant gratification, that immediate payoff, that

constant distraction, or overnight everything, it feeds a kind of microwaveable Christianity which wants God's promises fulfilled right now this moment. And if God can't deliver as fast as Amazon, then we'll search for satisfaction elsewhere. Which actually makes verses 39 and 40 striking.

Verse 39 says, **And all these [All of these people that have been mentioned in this chapter, all of these heroes of the faith. All of these great men and women who walked by faith who trusted God's promises, who's believed in Him.], though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.** Now we said a few weeks back that the commendation mentioned here means one of two things, 1. it's speaking of justification by faith, or 2. it's speaking of God's approbation of our faith, God commending us, His "Well done, good and faithful servant." I think it's likely the latter, but it doesn't matter so much. Both of those are theologically true, and all of these people at the end of their lives receive God's approbation, His "Well done." But despite God's commendation, they did not receive what was promised. Abraham lived 175 years, and according to the writer of Hebrews, did not receive what was promised. Moses lived 120 years and did not receive what was promised. David lived 70 years and did not receive what was promised and we could go on. Now, if a writer were exhorting you to walk by faith and keep your eye on the promise, why would he point out that everyone who went before you and walked by faith and kept their eyes on the promise, never received the things promised? Because he wants us to see something better. He wants us to see that God has **provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.** Now, the language of perfection in Hebrews is about being perfectly suited for communion with God, and there are degrees because you can grow in perfection, or sometimes it's translated maturity. But the goal that telos, the end point is perfect communion with the Father. And the writer's point is "When will we enter into that perfect, unhindered communion with the Father?" Well, we and Abraham and Sarah and Rahab and David and so forth, we will enter that perfect communion at the same time, at the resurrection. We keep our eyes on the future just as they did. Notice we're all looking for the same promise, right? There aren't two promises, one for the Old Testament saints and another for the new. Our eyes are on the Sabbath rest that awaits the people of God. We are looking for the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. We hope to enter in fully into the heavenly Holy Place where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. And to do that, not just in spirit at death, but in body at the resurrection. This is our hope.

But just as they did not receive the fullness of what was promised in their earthly lives, so we in this life will not receive the fullness of what is promised, which means we wait. We practice delayed gratification. We give up worldly things now, which can be had through sin for heavenly resurrection, new creation things to come which are ours by faith. We store up treasure in heaven, not treasures on earth. We practice

patience. The Greek word for "patience" is *makrothumia*, which means "long-suffering." And that is what we do. We suffer and we wait, we endure hardship and trial, and we wait. We experience little victories, and we wait for larger ones. And we wait in faith. We wait, looking to Jesus. We wait knowing that as Christ suffered and rose and entered into the Father's presence in His resurrected body, so we suffer now. But we'll rise and enter in as well. And some demand that God fulfill all of His promises right now. Some think if God doesn't come through now, God is not faithful. Some think if God doesn't come through now, we must not have enough faith. Some refuse to wait on God and so try to take good things now. But in so doing, they store up treasure on Earth, treasure that passes away rather than treasure in heaven.

But God promises good things to come. You may wonder why, and you may not like God timing, but God first endured in the person of Jesus in the hope of the resurrection. And now, He calls us to endure in the same hope, because as we believe in Jesus, that is our hope. Because of our union with Him as He rose, so will we rise. We will enter into perfect communion with our Father on the last day when we rise from the dead and dwell in resurrected bodies in a new creation in the presence of our Father forever in glory. Walk in faith now. By fighting in faith, to believe the promises, to walk in the promises, walk in faith. now. By losing in faith, knowing that every loss in this life will be compensated by the victories of the life to come. And walk in faith now by waiting in faith for those good things at Jesus' return the renewal of all things, and our bodily resurrection on the last day.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that you would help us as those heroes of faith who have gone before us. Help us to keep our eyes on what is coming, to keep our eyes on what has been promised to, to walk it through this life not as tourists, not as if we're on vacation, but as pilgrims who keep our eyes on the promised land. Help us to walk by faith, to fight the battle against sin and for faith to be willing to suffer and endure difficulty in this life with Christ knowing that good things are coming, and to keep our eye on that heavenly promised land, to wait in patience, to endure patiently in faith knowing that you have promised, and you will fulfill. We pray these things in Jesus' name, Amen.