June 11, 2023

Sermon 28

Hebrews 11:1-22

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Open your Bibles to Hebrews 10. We’re going to be in chapter 11, but I want to, for context’s sake, go back into the end of chapter 10. Chapter 10, and I will start reading in verse 32, and we will, Lord willing, make it to 11:22. The Word of God says this,

32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For,

“Yet a little while,

and the coming one will come and will not delay;

38 but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,

my soul has no pleasure in him.”

39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

This is coming on the heels of a warning, and probably the harshest, scariest warning in the book, and by extension, the Bible. But he comes back with this awesome assurance of their faith. They have been persevering and he looks back to their faithfulness even when they were being persecuted. He’s pointing to that and he’s going to let them know here in a little while that there’s more persecution on the horizon. So, the author of Hebrews is getting back to the main reason why he wrote this letter. From a pastoral heart, what he’s concerned about is the Church persevering through all trials, persecution, and temptations, and that we would remain faithful to Jesus. That’s his main concern, and the way that he’s been equipping us to persevere is that he keeps showing us how much better Jesus is and what we have in Christ as our prophet, priest, and king. Most of the book has been looking at His high priestly work and now that we’ve come through that, he’s getting back to, “So don’t shrink back. We have to persevere.” He says, “You have need of endurance.” Why? Because of the deceitfulness of sin. You have need of endurance. Why? Because of temptation and trials. And you have need of perseverance. Why? Because of suffering. Suffering’s going to be a reality. Persecution is going to be a reality for this group of believers and, by extension, all the Church. We have to heed this warning and encouragement to persevere.

So, he goes to Habakkuk and he quotes what God says to that prophet. What was going on with Habakkuk in that time is that they were on the brink of being invaded by the Chaldeans. So, Habakkuk was looking at this, reading the room, and he knows trouble is ahead. God’s people are in trouble and Habakkuk is basically whining and God rebukes him. He’s telling him, “Don’t shrink back. My righteous one lives by faith, specifically in what God has promised, and what God has promised is, “Yeah, it’s going to happen but I will be with you and I will deliver you.” God’s promising future salvation to Habakkuk and then Habakkuk responds to that encouragement with worship, saying, “My joy and my salvation is in you, and I’m going to hold fast to that.” It's a really cool picture.

Let me read this from one of the commentaries.

Habakkuk determines to hold fast to the Lord as the only source of salvation and joy. For the Hebrews, the prophet’s confidence in the face of imminent danger is a sterling example of faith to the end, one that the Author most certainly wanted to use to inspire his readers to a similar determination to remain steadfast in their faith.

So, throughout the letter, what we should be coming away with is asking, “Okay, what type of faith do I have? What type of faith am I operating out of?” Because, if you remember, way back in chapter 3, he holds up the Israelites as a negative example. Remember, the wilderness generation who didn’t get to enter into God’s rest. They didn’t get to enter into the Promised Land. And he says they didn’t enter in because of unbelief, and that unbelief was made evident by their disobedience. So, now what he’s going to do in encouraging us to persevere, to endure, is he’s going to hold up all of these examples in chapter 11 of people who were faithful. They are positive examples of what it looks like to endure. So, again, he says, “We’re not of those who shrink back and are destroyed but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

So, do I have faith that more represents the children of Israel in the wilderness, who fell away, or does my faith persevere?

I’ve got through verse 22 and next week Brody will preach. And I’m so glad the way that it was divvied up because he’s got some tough ones. The examples that he has, like Samson – persevered faithfully. You’re like, “But really?” But it’s encouraging and it’s difficult to understand. If you’re not familiar with Samson’s story, go read it. It's difficult to find redemptive moments in his life. Did he really trust the Lord? Did he really? But it’s encouraging in this. He’s not saying that faith that endures is always perfect. If you remember in chapter 4, because of the perfect high priestly work of Jesus, He’s constantly inviting us in to His presence to receive what? To receive what? Yes, grace and mercy for our time of need. Yeah. He knows us. We are not going to do this perfectly. Abraham did not do it perfectly. Noah didn’t do it perfectly. Even Joseph – there’s not a negative word written about Joseph in the Bible. We know he was a sinner. He needed grace, he needed mercy. But what we have to examine is what type of faith do I have? Do I tap out when the deceitfulness of sin tempts me. Do I shrink back when I’m being persecuted or there’s some sort of trial or does my faith ultimately – ultimately – persevere? Do I keep moving forward? Do I keep resetting my focus on Christ?

So, in looking at faith, Scripture says so much about faith. There are simple, theological definitions of faith. This is from Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. It’s super simple. He just says,

Saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ, as a living person, for forgiveness of sin and for eternal life with God.

Did you see it? He made a distinction. He said, “Saving faith.” Often, it’s worth taking the time to say “saving faith” or “biblical faith,” rather than just talking about ‘faith,’ because we know that there are so many different ideas of what faith is. For the believer, a lot of times, we need to talk about what faith isn’t. Because the worldly idea of faith will divorce reason from trust—you don’t need to have reason, or logic, or evidence; you can just believe something. People will put value on just this subjective, from within me, belief in whatever. And the Christian would say, “No, no, no. That’s not saving faith. That’s not biblical faith.” My faith is put in the person and the work of Jesus as described and revealed from the Word of God. So, my faith rests on the authority of Scripture and the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. That is not blind faith. That is not a leap out into nothing.

Some might say, “Were you there? Did you see Jesus raised from the dead? Did you see Him die on the cross? How do you know the Father was punishing Him for your sin? Did you see that? How can you trust that?” We’ll come back to that. I want to read this from O’Brien’s commentary. He said this,

The notion of hope in future salvation has run like a scarlet thread throughout Hebrews, it is intimately related to the divine promises and the inheritance that are yet to be attained. They are ‘the things hoped for’ and include the world to come (2:5), the sabbath rest (4:1-11), an eternal inheritance (9:15), the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22-24), and an unshakable kingdom (12:28).

What he is saying is that, for the believer, what he wants us to do in enduring is to hold onto this future hope, the realities of the Gospel that we believe in that haven’t’ taken place yet. That we will enter fully into the rest that Jesus provides.

So, he’s now going to give us a description of the type of faith that endures to the end. He does it in 11:1. You can go ahead and put up the slide that has the different translations. I’ll read it first from the ESV.

Now faith is the assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen. – ESV

Alright, now this verse sounds awesome, doesn’t it? You can see that I have the King James and the Christian Standard Bible translations up there, as well. They are a little different.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. - KJV

Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.- CSB

I remember – this was a long time ago – I loved watching boxing and my favorite boxer was Evander Holyfield. He was from Atlanta and I grew up just north of there. I remember watching a Tyson fight, with my granddad, when I was real young. Then, Holyfield came along, and I loved watching him with my cousins when they’d get the pay-per-view. I remember he would have these awesome fights with Riddick Bowe. It was incredible. Then, he was going to box this one guy, and I think it was Lennox Lewis. He was a little bit older, he was past his prime, and I remember they interviewed him, Holyfield, and he said, “An angel told me I’m going to knock him out in the fourth or fifth round.” I remember everyone being like, “Ooooooh, that’s bold.” And he believed it. He had so much faith. And he was pretty outspoken about being a Christian, but he just said, “An angel told me I’m going to win (in this round),” and at the beginning of the fight you could tell that he was just kind of going through the motions, then whatever round that was came, and then he went all in. And at the end of the round, the fight wasn’t over, and he went the distance, and I think, I’m pretty sure, that he lost. I remember at the beginning of the fight, one of the commentators, as they were talking about the prediction, quoted the King James Version, and he said, “Now, let’s remember that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” And I remember going, “Yeah,…what does that mean?” It sounds so good, doesn’t it. But all these translations are a little difficult to understand. The CSV is obviously closer to the King James Version, “Now, faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.”

What’s going on here is that different translations will go in one of two directions. They will either go with the more subjective idea of faith; and by ‘subjective,’ with the ESV, it’s that I look at what’s laid out in front of me and I have this assurance, or this conviction, that it’s true. But it puts the emphasis on it as coming from me. Whereas, the more objective way of understanding these words, like the King James or the Christian Standard, is no, no, no; it’s not that it’s coming from me, but what faith actually is, is the same thing that I’m hoping in. Do you see it?

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for…

So, the word here as ‘substance’ is translated as ‘nature’ in Hebrews 1:3, when it’s talking about Christ. It says, “He’s the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of His nature.” So, what is it there saying about Jesus? That Jesus is of the same nature, the same substance, as the Father. He is God. Now, later on, in 3:14, that same word is translated as ‘confidence’ or ‘conviction.’ So, how do we know which way to go? How we know which way to go with understanding the term is the same as all of the Bible; we have to see it in its context. And I believe the context here lends for it to be as the King James Version translates it, in the objective sense. Because what he is saying is that the type of faith that perseveres is the same substance of the things that we’re called to hope in: the eternal rest, the unshakable kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem, our future hope. He’s saying that the faith that we have is the same substance of it, and because of that, our faith itself is evidence that what we don’t right now see, it exists and we can know it.

I thought of an illustration, and if it doesn’t make sense just pretend, because it’s the only one I’ve got and we need to move on. But I imagined an old prospector. We’ll call him Gus. Gus is down in the creek and he’s panning for gold. He’s panning, and moving, and working his way up the creek. He’s dumping it out, dumping it out, dumping it out, and he finally finds a nugget. He finally finds a gold nugget. This is the substance of what he’s hoping for. Do you see it? He doesn’t want just that little nugget, but what he’s hoping for is that the hill above the creek is filled with the gold, that there’s a lode, there’s a pocket of gold underneath the surface. So, what that gold nugget becomes for him is the evidence of what is unseen. He knows it’s there. Why? Because he has this. He has it in his hand. It's both the substance of what he’s hoping for and it’s the evidence that it’s there.

So, what is he saying? He’s saying that for us that our faith is the substance of what we are hoping in. Why? Because it doesn't originate in you. It doesn’t originate in me. Where does our faith flow from? Where does it come from? Good question. We’re going to cheat, and don’t tell Brody, because I’m going to look at 12:1. He’s going to do this next week, but we’re going to look ahead.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,…

He’s talking about all the people we’re about to meet in chapter 11.

…let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

He’s the founder and perfecter. He’s at once both the prime, ultimate example of faithful endurance in the midst of persecution all the way to the end, and at the same time, He is the author of our salvation. He’s the founder, trailblazer, or the source of our faith. He authors our faith; He’s the source of our faith. How can faith be the same substance as our future salvation? It's because it all comes from Christ. It's the salvation He provides, and the faith that we have that is able to perceive that Jesus is God. The faith that we have that is evidence for us that, yeah, when Jesus said to Thomas – do you remember what Jesus said to Thomas? “You see. You see me here now. Good. You believe, that’s great.” But then, what did He say? “Blessed are those who haven’t seen but believe.” I wasn’t there. I wasn’t with Thomas, inspecting the scars in Jesus’ hand. But I see, and I believe, and I trust that Jesus rose from the dead. Why? Because Jesus is the source of my faith, and He’s given me enough of it that I can see that. I trust it. It's the same substance. And for me, it is absolutely the evidence that I need to live my life for Jesus, believing that it will return, believing that He has an unshakable kingdom that will never be taken away. How can I believe that? Because I’m not resting on my ability to muster up faith and hold on with my strength. No, Jesus gave me the faith to believe, and that is a gift.

Ephesians 2:8-9. You know it well.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

What’s the gift? Grace and faith, together. We’re saved by grace through faith, and they are both a gift of God. We don’t get to boast. Why? It’s not that one day you saw the evidence of the Gospel and you said, “I choose to believe.” Maybe God used that, but what happened is this. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. As you heard the Gospel, Jesus himself, just like He spoke the universe into existence, while you were hearing the Gospel, while you were hearing the Word of God, He spoke that reality into your soul and you believed. He gave you faith as a gift, because He is gracious.

John Piper said this,

It may be that all this means [[1]](#footnote-1)(talking about assurance or substance) is that faith is a deep confidence that the promises of God will come true so that we bank on them. That would be enough to free us from the fears and greed and worldliness. But I think it’s more…Faith does not just feel confident that this is coming some day. Faith has spiritually laid hold of and perceived and tasted that it is real. And this means that faith has the substance or the nature of what is hoped for in it. Faith's enjoyment of the promise is a kind of substantial downpayment of the reality coming.

Do you see it? We can believe in all these things that we don’t actually see, because we’ve experienced saving faith, and it’s like this downpayment of what’s coming.

He says this in verse 2,

For by it the people of old received their commendation.

They were approved; they were accepted by this kind of faith. Then, he illustrates it this way.

3 By faith we…

He’s with us here.

3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Paul tells us in Romans that from the beginning, the ancient people of this world, from the beginning, we suppress this truth. Although we should be able to look at creation and say, “There has to be a God and He has to be like this,” we suppress that truth. And here, what the writer of Hebrews is saying is, “By faith, we can perceive that everything visible was made by the invisible, namely, the word of Christ. He spoke the universe into existence, and not only did He create it but He upholds it now by the word of His power.” We can see that. We can perceive it by this faith that He’s given us. It's as if because Christ has given us faith, then we can see fingerprints of God all over creation. That’s why we believe.

So, he holds up these Old Testament believers, saints, as these prime examples, these positive examples of what it looks like to believe. It's not just a matter that there’s all this future salvation that I’m called to believe in, so I need to endure, I need to persevere, I need to be faithful. It also means I’ve got to work. I’ve got to work. I’ve got to live in light of what I believe. That means that my faith should be put into action.

So, verse 4. We will not spend a ton of time looking at all the different examples, but we will see what he’s emphasizing.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

Pause. So, we know from the Old Testament that when God comes and Cain has killed Abel, and God says, “Your brother’s blood calls out to me,” remember what it was calling out for was justice. That’s not what he’s talking about here. He’s saying that Abel’s witness still speaks. The witness of what? That righteousness comes by faith. It's not something that we earn. That this has always been God’s plan.

Verse 5,

5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

He’s saying that this type of faith – now, listen. Look at me. This type of faith pleases God. And I think sometimes, for folks who are more reformed in their understanding of salvation, they are scared to start talking this way. Because we want to make sure that everyone knows that we believe we’re justified, we’re declared righteous, and we’re accepted by God, solely because of the work of Jesus. Amen and Amen. It is only by Christ that we are saved and made acceptable to God. It's His righteousness. But listen – this type of faith comes from Jesus, and when we live it out, it pleases the Father. And that should motivate us. God wants us to be motivated by living a life that pleases Him. We can please God by our words, and our actions, and our deeds. That’s encouraging. It should encourage you to want to please the Lord, to know that when you share the Gospel faithfully, when you say ‘no’ to temptation, when you encourage a brother or sister in Christ, when you get up early and you set time apart just to spend with Him, it pleases Him. He’s pleased with you. Why? Because you are living out faith. You are putting your faith into action.

Verse 7,

7 By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Again, faith acting on truth that’s not yet seen. Noah had no idea what rain was, but he believed God’s Word. He took God at His Word and He acted on it, which meant spending hundreds of years building a boat on dry ground, because he could perceive that what God said would come to be, because he trusted in the faithfulness of God.

Verse 8,

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

He trusted God. He believed God was faithful, and he responded in obedience, trusting that God would keep His Word. His faith was such that he left everything he knew behind, because he believed that God would provide what He said.

11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Verse 13,

3 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Here, I believe what he is referencing is that some of them didn’t receive the promise that was given to them in their lifetime, but they understood that all the promises that they were given were pointing to the greater promises of what we all have in Christ, the greater inheritance.

15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

17 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, 18 of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

See what he is saying? For Abraham, if God was telling him to kill Isaac, it made more sense for God to raise Isaac from the dead than it would make sense for God to go back on His word. See that? He had never seen anybody raised from the dead, he had never experienced that, but what he knew was that God specifically said, “The promise will come through Isaac.” So that night that Isaac spent sleepless, he considered this. “Okay, if God is telling me to kill Isaac, I have to obey. But what that means is that God will raise Isaac from the dead, because God will not break His word, because God is faithful.”

For us, we’ve been given better promises than Abraham. We’re promised an eternal rest, a heavenly Jerusalem, a kingdom that will never end. We’re promised a life where sin and temptation are no more. We’re promised an eternity of perfect fellowship with one another and perfect worship of our God and our Savior. And sin would lie to us, and deceive us, and try to make us think that what it’s promising is better than those promises. And this world will mock us, persecute us, try to intimidate us, to let go of our confidence in Christ, to back off of our witness, and to shrink back, and we have to have the same determination to say that it makes more sense to believe in the promises of God that I don’t right now see, because of His character, and because of His nature, than it does to believe this immediate, tangible thing that I could have, or avoid because of His faithfulness.

17 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, 18 of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. 20 By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Joseph so trusted the faithfulness of God’s character and word, that he told his descendants what to do with his bones when God delivered them from slavery some four hundred years later. Time doesn’t change the faithfulness of God’s character and His Word.

So, all throughout the letter he’s saying “Hold fast…hold firm…don’t be like these people who shrunk back and were destroyed. Don’t be like these people who gave into the temptation and walked away from the Lord. Endure – you have need of endurance.” Tonight, this week, we all have need of endurance. So, he’s saying have this type of faith; this type of faith that comes from Jesus.

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.

And here’s what He continues to say to us, and we read it in chapter 12. Saving faith, biblical, saving faith, that God through Christ authors, and perfects, and gifts to us – if you’re a Christian you have that faith. But every day, every day, we have to strengthen ourselves in that faith. And how do we do that? We stay connected to the source. He says it over and over, “Look to Jesus. Listen to Jesus.” Why? It strengthens our faith. Yeah, saving faith is a one-time thing that has ongoing work in our life; to make us more like Jesus, our prime example of what it looks like to endure trials and persecution faithfully. So, we look to Christ and it strengthens our faith. And we look to these examples to know this: it’s real, it’s possible. These were men and women like us, who had faith, and they were able to persevere faithfully to the end of their lives. That’s what God is calling us to. And what the writer of Hebrews was confident in, what I’m confident in, is that we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Pray with me.

Lord Jesus, God, we love you. I pray that this would be true of our church, God, that we would persevere faithfully to the end of our days, individually and together. That when you come back that you would find this church faithful, whether it’s in our lifetime or a hundred years from now, that Red Oak would be a faithful church. God, that we would look to you consistently, that we would grow in our faith, that we would be faithful, that our witness would be clear and bright to the world around us. God, I pray for those of us who have lived in sin this week, that we believed the lie and momentarily took our eyes off of you and put it on the things of the world, or we’ve had opportunities to share Christ and we’ve been intimidated by those who would mock us or persecute us, I pray that you would give us the grace and mercy we need to get our eyes back on Christ and to be faithful. Lord, I pray now, as we go into the time of worship, that you would be exalted. You and you alone are worthy of glory. In Christ’s name, Amen.

1. Italics mine [↑](#footnote-ref-1)