

Sermon 9.8.2024 Sermon

Faith | Hebrews 11:33-40

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKER

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Good morning, friends! Thank you for that lovely welcome, Janice.

I have a sermon to share with you all. I wasn't sure where in the sermon to put the scripture passage, so I'm going to read it now, at the beginning. We've been going through Hebrews 11. We're at the end. We're looking at this ending bit that starts at verse 33, and so the writer says, "Through faith, they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength, and they became powerful in battles and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again." Those are all really good things. I like it. I like that part.

Here's the rest of it. "There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sawed in two. They were killed by the sword. They went around in sheepskins and goat skins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These all were commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect." The word of the Lord? Yeah, I really like that first half, and I really don't like that last half. But there it is. That's our passage.

So here we are at the end of our journey through Hebrews 11, and what a wild ride it has been. It's been very interesting to me personally, as we've looked in depth at each person mentioned in this chapter, and each person mentioned is meant to be sort of exemplary of a life of faith, right? And as we've gone through all of their lives, they were so different from each other.

And I was thinking about that, and so I just kind of went through as I was prepping to speak today, and I listed each name mentioned, and I want to read through the list, just hit every single name. And I want you to think, as you hear these names, what comes to mind, what stands out? Is there a particular character or a particular story that jumps out to you this morning? Maybe you've heard most of the sermons in this series. Maybe you've heard a few. Maybe this is your first Sunday with us, in which case, welcome. But here goes.

Here's the list: We've got Abel and Cain, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Isaac, Joseph, Moses's parents, Moses, the people of Israel, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and yes. So that's the list. Does anything come to mind for you? Is there any name that stands out? Like I said, it's been a wild ride. Does anybody want to share anything that pops out? To you right now. No pressure. Charlie, what do you got?

So, what jumps out to Charlie is that all of these people did not receive what was promised to them, which is interesting. Yes, very interesting. And they're exemplars of faith for us in this chapter, my thoughts are similar to yours. Charlie, what comes to mind for me as I think about the stories behind each of these names?

These are people, and they're people. They do peopley stuff like some of them seemed smart, some of them seemed kind of dumb. Some of them were foolhardy or afraid or unsure, confused. Sometimes they acted out of love, sometimes they acted out of self-service. Some found community or found isolation. They did things they could be proud of, and they did things that they deeply regretted. They were all just people, and we're people, and all of the things can happen and do happen, and we make our way through our lives.

As everything is happening, we make our way the best we can, and that's what I see these people doing, making their way the best they can. And the question I wind up asking is, what does faith have to do with all of the things that happen and all of the ways we react and feel and all the things we do as we make our way through our lives. What difference does faith make as we're people living our lives? Things are happening?

I could really relate to what Pastor Tracy shared with us a few weeks ago when she said that for years she thought faith meant victory. I also have thought that faith would lead to winning, to finding the answer, to getting fulfillment. I also assumed that, and I was taught that in various ways by religion. I see such an entanglement of this idea of material, circumstantial, even political winning, a very sort of American concept of winning, entangled with a religious understanding of faith and spiritual victory. But now, at this point in my life, I'm coming to a different understanding and really realizing that painful and joyful things happen in life, no matter whether we do all the right things or not.

Thank you for being right there with me. Yes, painful and joyful things, they will happen whether we do the right things or not, life keeps on, lifeing and things happen. Sometimes we may contribute to the way our circumstances unfold, or sometimes it might be due to causes completely outside of our control. I was reminded of how Jesus said it's written in Matthew five, verse 45 that God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. Life happens no matter who you are or honestly, what you do, life will happen.

And a life of faith doesn't necessarily mean a life of victory in a material or physical sense. If there's anything we can say about the people in this chapter, their lives went up and down. And around and around, the same as ours do, and they didn't know what was going on most of the time, just like us, and they had hopes and dreams that sometimes came to pass and sometimes did not come to pass just like us.

A life of faith is a life of sometimes winning and sometimes losing, honestly, just like a life without conscious faith. And that statement that I just said goes against so much of that tangle of American culture, and I'll label it prosperity gospel that I was taught by religion and it somehow continues to hang on to the windowsill of my brain, like digging its fingernails in to try to not fall out, even though I am trying to defenestrate it. Thank you. I'm trying to throw it out, but it keeps on hanging in there, and so just being able to recognize it for what it is helpful for me.

But what I can see now is that when viewed from the outside, a life of faith sometimes might look like a life of losing. Jesus, the ultimate hero of the faith by outward appearances, was a man who had no financial wealth. He spent his adulthood, that is written for us as a wandering religious teacher, surrounded mainly by people who had little power in their society, and he was eventually killed and buried while in the prime of his life. From the outside, that doesn't look great, right? It doesn't look significant just from the outside.

And yet, we're given more of an inside view of his life by Scripture. And I think that's where faith comes into play. We're shown that his main value, Jesus's main objective was to commune with God, to pay attention to what God was doing and saying in every situation. That Jesus's inner relationship with God was awe-inspiring, that even though he did not have to go through the death that he eventually did experience, he chose to trust God's path through it, and he allowed all the ridicule, ridicule and beating and torture and eventually death to happen.

And Jesus is our ultimate hero of the faith. We're shown in Scripture that through it all, he kept his eyes on God's love, on God's nearness, on God's faithfulness. He scorned the shame of the cross. We're told he didn't consider it shame when he lost everything, as far as outward

appearances would tell. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the joy set before him, the love between Him and the Father, and the goal for that love to be extended to and experienced by all of humanity.

And so, I come to this conclusion that faith is unseen. So much of faith is a completely inner matter. It's unseen. It's on the inside of us. It's our connection with God, our trust in God's love no matter what happens. I have a personal mantra that God loves us all the time no matter what happens, and I think that this affects my understanding of faith a lot. I think that faith is an inner sense of connection with God and a trust that God's love will extend to us no matter what's going on. In this way, our inner lives of faith might be steady and firm, even if it feels like our lives are falling down around us. And I think we can have faith even when we're freaked out and feeling chaotic on the inside too. Faith trusts that God's love can come in, even into my inner mess too, and love me when I don't have my emotional or mental or relational poop together.

God's love can come and soften through my stupid stubbornness. God's love can help me let go of my self-righteousness. God's love can show me when I'm the one at fault, without shame, but with lots of grace to grow and learn. All of those things were very personal. This is what God's love shows me, Terry, all the time, because I have a lot of stupid, stubborn, stupid stubbornness, and a lot of self-righteousness sometimes, but God's love can help me learn and grow, because it's so full of grace and can help me change.

Faith isn't only on the inside, as the book of James tells us, faith must influence our actions, and thus be visible by what we choose to do, how we live and act in this world will be affected by our faith.

You know, one of the stories alluded to in this passage is found in the book of Daniel, the little comment, where it says that they quenched the fury of the flames. It's a story about these three Hebrew men who had been stolen from their homeland and brought to Babylon, and there they rose to become some kind of government officials, and they were given oversight of like precincts in the city or something, and they were ordered, along with the rest of their fellow officials, on this one occasion, to worship this statue that the king of Babylon had erected, and they refused to do so, and so they were brought before the king, and they were threatened with being burned in the furnace.

And it's what they said to the king that is so inspiring and has echoed through generations to us today. They said, We know our God could save us from the burning fire, but whether he does or not, in whether he does or doesn't save us from death, we aren't going to worship your statue. And like maybe a miracle will happen, or maybe a miracle won't happen, but regardless, I'm going to worship God, and I think that that's just like a really pure statement of

faith, right? Like maybe things will go well, or maybe it will all fall apart. But my inner connection with God is going to stay no whether it goes good or bad, right? That's faith. It's on the inside, but it has a strong effect on what we do on the outside, no matter what our circumstances wind up being like.

You know, I'm a bit of a sensitive soul. FYI, I am totally horrified by any kind of torture or violence. I don't watch movies that have those things. If it shows up in a bit of a movie that I'm watching, I literally close my eyes and try not to listen like I can't. I cannot. I cannot explain to you the wretchedness in my gut, right when I think about torture or violence or that type of thing. So as a teenager and in my earlier 20s, growing up in a church culture that emphasized the possibility of dying or being tortured for your faith, I can tell you that I agonized, agonized over the question that was asked all too often. If you were asked if you believe in Jesus upon penalty of death, would you say yes? I. Agonized over that question.

I obviously wanted to say yes, but that I that I would be a valiant martyr if that was required of me. But how could I know I agonized? Side note, honestly, as I'm remembering this, it's so manipulative, and I don't like that. This was a thing, but it was, at least in my like church and youth group experience. And here I am this morning talking with you all about a scripture passage that mentions exactly those things. Thank you, wonderful, please. Can I just preach about trees and flowers and birds? I don't know, but you know, after back to my 20-year-old self, I digress, my little my little 20-year-old Terry, after pleading with God to help me with this, to be sure that I would say yes, I believe in Jesus, I felt like God showed me something that I'd like to share with you today.

I felt like God said to me one day, no, you don't have what it would take. That's because that's not what you're going through. You have what you need for what you're going through right now. And should you ever face torture or death for the sake of my name, my dear daughter? Well, you would have what you needed then too. And so, I came away from that with an assurance that God always gives us what we need at the time, that we need it. We don't have to try to stock up grace for some possible happening in the future, we need to live in the grace that we're given for this day. Give us this day our daily bread. So, take that and do what you will with it. But it really helped me to find peace knowing that God will provide what I need to live each day and I don't need to borrow tomorrow's trouble. Just like the flowers of the field, I don't have to borrow tomorrow's trouble. There's plenty today. As Jesus Himself said, I uh, yesterday, when I was finishing up writing these words that I now speak to you all, I was meditating on how Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of God.

I was thinking about how he fixed his eyes on the joy set before him, and I was meditating and asking, What was that joy? And I thought it was love. It was connection and love with God, the

Father, and with humanity as well. I thought about how Jesus prayed, as is recorded in John 17, that we humans would experience the oneness with God that he did, and how that was his primary request to God through everything, Jesus didn't give up his connection to God through it all. He kept his eyes fixed on that love, and in doing that, he showed us what faith is, the author and perfecter of our faith. He showed us how to do it in every circumstance, whether we're up or down. It's connection with God that holds us steady. It's keeping our minds and our hearts, maybe our bodies, fixed on the love of God and the grace that he's giving us in every moment for that moment, and I was drawn to the song it is well, as I was thinking about these things yesterday, I was thinking about the words through it all, through it, all my eyes are on you. And I thought about how that hymn speaks of the tumultuous seas and the unpredictability of tragedy and the faith that chooses to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus no matter what happens, because his love is fixed on us no matter what happens.

And so, I've asked Kevin to lead us in that song as we close this morning, and I would like us all to just take this song as a moment to connect with the one who is always loving us no matter what's happening, because that's faith. Amen.