

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY when life gets tough!

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

“First Things” in the Way of Faith

(Hebrews 10:32--11:7)

Study #11

Introduction: The benefit of the rearview mirror...

On Friday morning, Kathy and I had reason to be thankful for our car's windshield.

The wind "shield" is a shield. As we drove 70mph on a country road, it protected us from wind, bugs, and the bird that miscalculated and hit the glass. (The windshield is fine. The bird, sadly, not so much.)

But the windshield is more than a shield. We look through the windshield to see where we're going. We can see storms or mountains or the coast.

The view through the windshield helps us navigate the way forward. In that sense, the windshield is a metaphor for progress. For us, today, it could be a metaphor for the adventure of walking with Jesus.

All this being said, though, this morning we aren't looking through the windshield to what's ahead so much as we are taking a long, thoughtful look through the humble rearview mirror.

Last Sunday, we worked our way through a hard passage (10:26-31). The author of Hebrews gave us his most severe warning.

It was a sobering warning, and we all took that warning to heart.

Today, Hebrews turns much more positive, refreshing and energizing, as we look behind us.

Moving On by Looking Back (10:32-38)

Remember... (vv. 32-34)

You suffered for Jesus (vv. 32-33a)

The context / setting

[32] But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened...

He invites his readers to look through the rearview mirror, and think back.

As they did that, they may have remembered their Jewish roots and family Passover celebrations.

But the word **“enlightened”** would have brought to mind the time when they came to know Jesus.

We don't know how they heard about Him. It may have been from one of the original apostles, or maybe from Paul,

Someone told them the Jesus story. These readers listened. They believed and were **“enlightened.”**

Are you remembering your own story right now? Are you remembering that season when you first heard. You heard and you believed and you were redeemed.

Then, post-enlightenment, you may remember that you started getting together with other Christians.

You made friends. You and these others learned and served and worshipped Jesus together. Together, you all grew in n Jesus, took next steps with Him.

That's what Christians have done for two thousand years.

These Christians who first read the letter to the Hebrews grew, got solid in their faith, matured, and started shining like bright lights in their communities for Jesus.

Sometime, perhaps not long after they were "**enlightened**", they began to have the experiences the author describes.

Sufferings

[32] But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings...

The picture the author is painting is of an athletic contest where opponents were competing to see who could make the Christians' lives more miserable.¹

No doubt the physical suffering was intense. But the overall misery was made worse, **[33a] partly by being made a public spectacle through insults and distress...**

The Christians were humiliated in their communities. They were ridiculed by their families and neighbors. The mocking was very public.²

Of course, this is something that still happens today in places where it's dangerous to be an outspoken follower of Jesus.

But the readers of this letter stood strong in the face of these sufferings. And they did more than just stand strong.

You served others who suffered for Jesus (vv. 33b-34a)

¹ The word that my version translates "**conflict**" is the Greek word *athlōsin*, the word from which we get our English word *athlete*.

² The word that my version translates "**public spectacle**" is the word from which we get our English word *theater*.

Fellowship with other suffering Christians (v. 33b)

[33b]...partly by becoming companions³ with those who were so treated.

They didn't distance themselves from other Christians who were suffering. They embraced them, identified with them, and helped them.⁴

Personal losses (v. 34a)

[34a] For you showed sympathy to the prisoners...

By the word "**prisoners**" we learn that they were living in places where the practice of Christianity was illegal. These prisoners had broken laws by worshiping and speaking out in the Name of Jesus.

So, bucking cultural headwinds and willingly throwing away their own good reputations, the readers of Hebrews visited imprisoned Christians, befriended them, and brought them food and clothing.

Besides these "above and beyond" services, these readers also paid a steep, personal price to follow Jesus. They lost possessions.

There may be no better way to appreciate the seriousness of this loss than to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine that our possessions could be seized if we continued to follow Jesus.

Imagine that you knew that you...
...stood a good chance of losing access to your 401(k) if you were vocal about following Jesus.
...knew of fellow Christians here in San Antonio who had their car impounded for attending a worship service.

³ *Companions* here is NOT *metoxoi*, which is what Jesus calls His "**partners**" (Hebrews 1:9); it is *koinwnoi*, a word that carries the idea of fellowship, or sharers in something on a human level.

⁴ There is an old and rich tradition that says that the readers had helped the author during his own imprisonment.

...could lose your job, lose a chance at a good education, not be allowed to purchase a home if you let your light shine for Jesus.

Can you imagine the internal dialogue you would have with yourself, or the discussions that you and your family would have, if those were the likely consequences of publicly following Jesus?

That is what is happening in lots of places in our world today and it was similar to what had happened in the past to the readers of Hebrews.

So...why bring up these past experiences?

Well, the author was urging his readers to look in the rearview mirror and remember these faithfulnesses from the past to motivate them in the present.

His message was, *"Come on, friends. You overcame great hardship in the past. You can do it again now!"*

He even dangled a tantalizing memory in front of them, calling to mind that they **[34a]...accepted joyfully the seizure of your property**

Joyfully. How so? Here's how.

Moving Forward (vv. 34b-38)

Driven by hope (vv. 34b-36)

Possessions lost here will be replaced there (v. 34b)

[34b]...accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and lasting possession.

These first-century Christians were able to hold loosely to the things of this world because they were confident that the things to come were better.

These readers embraced the idea that this world and all its attractions will fade. The inheritance they had to look forward to in Jesus' coming kingdom will last.

That's how they had successfully and joyfully navigated persecution in the past.

But that was then, this is now. And now they are being sorely tempted to throw in the towel, call it quits, and stop following Jesus.

The author continues, beginning his next comment with a very important **"Therefore."**

The thought is that because this world's **"possessions"** don't last, THEREFORE don't live in such a way that you forfeit the **"better and lasting"** possessions, here called a **"reward."**

The reward for holding to our confidence (v. 35)

[35] Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

Today, our city landfills are filled with stuff that we have thrown away. Things that are either worn out or used up or out of date.

Kathy and I have a big black, a big green, and a big blue bin outside of our house in which to put our throw-aways.

Here, our author warns us to not throw away our **"confidence."** And what is that confidence?

Given the thread that we've followed since starting to look at Hebrews, it really isn't a mystery.

The confidence he's referring to is the confidence that faithfully following Jesus will bring us a rich inheritance and the privilege of reigning with Jesus as His partners in His coming kingdom.

He warns us against *"throwing that confidence away."*

And if a Christian does that, if he abandons the community of faith, stops following Jesus, and reverts to Judaism - or to ANYTHING else! - he is throwing away the **“great reward”**⁵ (that is, the *rich inheritance*) Jesus wants him to have.

We don't want to do that! And what we need if hope to receive that **“great reward”** is endurance.

The need for endurance

[36] For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

Let's review. When we believe in Jesus, we are redeemed, forgiven, and adopted into God's family.

Eternal life is a free gift of grace given to the one who believes. No works on our part plays any part.

We either receive eternal life as a gift from God, or we'll never have it because it is impossibly expensive. We could never afford it. Jesus paid it all.

But here, the author is talking about something that involves endurance (holding up under hard circumstances), doing the will of God, obedience.

The promise we will obtain by doing God's will is not eternal life. It is a rich inheritance in Jesus' coming kingdom.⁶

⁵ In English, the word **“reward”** is positive. It is good if you get a *reward*. That is not necessarily the sense of the Greek word that we translate here **“reward.”** The author used this word at Hebrews 2:2 to describe what happened to Jews who broke the commands of the Mosaic covenant. There, it is rightly rendered, **“punishment.”** The better understanding of the word, then, is *“payment of wages for work done.”* Or simply, *“result.”*

⁶ In Hebrews, this is what is promised as a reward for doing the will of God. It is the **“great salvation”** (Hebrews 2:3) which we will inherit. Not eternal life.

And these readers had started off toward that inheritance so well. They did great, at first. And a good start is commendable. It's good to start off well.

But no Olympian wins the prize at the halfway mark of a race. The runner who wins the prize is the one who endures to the end and finishes strong.

A good start is way better than a bad start. But the point is a good ending. And a good ending is obtained by enduring, persevering...faith.

Walking by faith (vv. 36-38)

**[37] FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE,
HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY.
[38] BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE WILL LIVE BY FAITH;
AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.**

The first line of verse 38 is the key line to the message of the Old Testament prophecy of Habakkuk. So, let's briefly review...

Referring to the Chaldean empire, God told the prophet (Habakkuk) that He was going to judge **“the haughty sinner.”**

First, God was going to use the Chaldeans to judge the Jews. But then, God was going to judge the Chaldeans.

God told Habakkuk that the righteous person was to accept that promise as true. It was a promise could only be accepted as true by faith.

To Habakkuk's physical eyes, it didn't look like the Chaldeans were going to be judged. All he could see with his eyes was the destruction of his beloved Jerusalem by the Chaldeans!

But God's **“righteous one”** (the person who is redeemed) is called to live by faith, not by sight. He is to take God at His word.

The great, governing principle of life for the righteous person is to be faith. Trust God. Believe God.

So Habakkuk was to take it by faith that what God says is going to happen is going to happen. Habakkuk was called to believe and behave in light of God's coming judgment against the Chaldeans.⁷

Hebrews tells us that we are to take it by faith that Jesus will keep all of His promises to give His people a great reward for faithfulness. We can believe that.

We are to accept as true everything Jesus says, stake our lives on the truths God reveals, and live on the basis of them.

And then, this:

[38b] And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in Him.

Here, again, is the sobering reality that we might *“live by faith”* or we might *“shrink back.”*

It is a choice. Reward and inheritance hang in the balance. Which will we choose?

And here at the end of this chapter, the author, who has a well-earned reputation for being severe, turns positive and hopeful.

A vote of confidence, a call to follow Jesus (v. 39)

[39] But we⁸ are not among those who shrink back to destruction,⁹ but of those who have faith for the safekeeping of the soul.¹⁰

⁷ This verse is quoted at Romans 1:17. The meaning there, in keeping with Paul's purpose in writing Romans, was to affirm that a person becomes righteous before God by faith. (So also at Galatians 3:11.) In Hebrews, the meaning is much closer to the original intent of Habakkuk, which is not surprising, given the Jewish slant of Hebrews.

⁸ Note the emphatic placement of “we.” (First in the sentence.) Also, note the emphasis on second person references in the passage to this point. This is not an

Catch the optimism here.¹¹ It's positively upbeat.

The author affirms the direction he's going to go - the path of faith - and calls us to join him.¹²

And with that, we turn over to Hebrews, chapter 11 and focus on faith.¹³

The chapter begins with a working definition of faith.

About Faith... (11:1-3)

A Working Definition of Faith (v. 1)

Up to this point, we've been dealing in Hebrews with objective realities.

They are spiritual realities, sure. But they are things that are objectively true: The exalted Sonship of Christ, His High Priesthood on the order of Melchizedek, a heavenly tabernacle, our rich inheritance.

“us vs them” situation. Rather, the author and his readers are in the same situation. They are all - as are we - challenged to walk by faith.

⁹ The word that we translate here *“destruction”* has a very nuanced meaning in the Old Testament. And *“destruction”* can refer to eternal condemnation in hell in the New Testament. But it need not mean that. It can refer to the loss of physical life or even of valuable things (See Matthew 26:8; Acts 8:20; 25:16; 1 Timothy 6:9; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:16) Each use must be judged in its context. In this context we most naturally think of the ruin that comes upon the violator of the New Covenant - just as we saw last Sunday in the discussion of the severe warning of chapter 10.

¹⁰ There is no need to tie *“safekeeping”* (Greek *peripoiesis*) to final redemption. *“Safekeeping”* most often refers to saving a life from physical death and is best understood that way here, too.

¹¹ The sense is that the believer who lives by faith doesn't experience God's judgment in this life we were warned about earlier in chapter 10.

¹² This verse doesn't take away the bite of all that has gone before. The warning still stands and the possibility of drift / falling away / drawing back is still present.

¹³ This begins the last major section of the letter. (11:1--12:29) The exposition / teaching is chapter 11; the admonition / exhortation is chapter 12. We could say that chapter 11 simply expands on the truth of Habakkuk 2:4: *“the just shall live by faith.”* Or, as it rendered in Hebrews, *“My righteous one will live by faith.”*

Now, he turns to a subjective reality: faith. So what is faith?

[11:1] Now faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof (or, conviction) of things not seen.

Faith is a decision to consider as good as done the promises of God. It is to be persuaded that whatever God says is reality.¹⁴

Anyone can believe anything or all kinds of things. It is possible to believe or disbelieve that people landed on the moon, that 9/11 was a massive conspiracy, that the Holocaust never happened, or that JFK was killed by aliens.

My belief about these things doesn't impact reality one bit. Reality exists independent of my beliefs. God exists - or not - independent of the beliefs of Christians or atheists.

But, if you choose to lead a life of faith in God, you are deciding to live in light of a kingdom you haven't seen. That is the life of faith and that is the subject of Hebrews 11.

The author is giving us a compelling collection of stories of redeemed people who lived faith-fully, and says, "*Follow them!*"

The Means of Approval from the Beginning (v. 2)

[2] For by it the people of old gained approval.

It has always been faith that has brought a smile to God's face. He loves it when His children walk by faith.

A faith-filled life is what God is looking for in His people. He commends it. From the most ancient people to us, today, God applauds our faith, our trusting reliance on Him.

¹⁴ Some suggest that upostasis = essence; elenxos = proof. This would be foreign to the author's thought. The unseen realities of God are not dependent on our faith to give them substance or to offer proof of them.

He points us to the rearview mirror and invites us to look as far backward as possible.

For Instance, Creation (v. 3)

[3] By faith we understand that the world has been created by the word of God so that what is seen has not been made out of things that are visible.

He is referencing Genesis 1 here. We're thinking about the creation, something none of us were present to witness.

We all have to admit that our understanding of the most fundamental reality - the fact that there is a universe - is determined by faith. It is shaped by faith.

Every possible way to imagine the origin of the universe is a faith position.

Evolution (theistic or atheistic) is a faith position. So is six-day creationism, day/age creationism, the gap theory, historical creationism or any other explanation.

Hebrews 11:3 gives us the essential biblical understanding of creation:

The world¹⁵ was created by the word of God. Things that are seen were made out of things not seen. God produced something out of nothing.

We who believe in Jesus view the entire creation of which we are a part through the eyes of faith.

Building on that foundation, our faith in God is to inform how we approach all of life. We don't bring our faith to church on Sundays and then place it on a shelf for the rest of the week.

No. We exercise our faith muscle in everything. Just like a few of the earliest humans did. Like Abel.

¹⁵ Literally, "*the ages*." The term probably has in view all the places and times that have every existed.

The Faith of the Ancients (11:4-5)

The Faith of Abel (v. 4)

[4] By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he was attested to be righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Abel and his brother, Cain, were sons of our first parents, Adam and Eve. We read Abel's story in Genesis 4.

There we read that God had regard for Abel's offering, but He did not have regard for the offering brought by Cain.

The Bible actually doesn't tell us what made the difference.

Was it the attitude of the offerer (Abel offered by faith; Cain didn't) or was it the type of offering (Abel's was a blood sacrifice; Cain's was an offering of grain) that made the difference?

I think it was both. What we know is that Cain was so angry about God's rejection that he killed his brother.

But did you notice that Hebrews 11 doesn't only focus on the one sacrifice that led to the world's first murder.

The author touched on Abel's "**gifts**" (plural) which points to a life filled with God-pleasing sacrifices. Abel was a faithful worshipper.

The result of his faithfulness was...his murder. And we read that "**...through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.**" (v. 4)

The next model of faith is Enoch.

The Faith of Enoch (v. 5)

[5] By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for before he was taken up, he was attested to have been pleasing to God.

We find Enoch's story in Genesis 5. It's only four very short verses, but his story is provocative.

The one observation of the life of Enoch in Genesis is that he "**walked with God.**" Scripture doesn't record any of Enoch's righteous deeds.

Including Adam, Enoch marked humanity's 7th generation. And there was something so remarkable about his relationship with God that it is highlighted here.¹⁶ Enoch was "**pleasing to God.**"

The fact that he is included in Hebrews 11 confirms that he was a man of faith. He was faithful, just like Abel was faithful.

But while Abel was murdered, God delivered Enoch from this earthly life without any kind of a death. He was taken straight to glory.

And, like Abel's life, Enoch's life lives on. He has a testimony.

Both Abel and Enoch lived before the great flood. Noah's life straddled the flood.

The Faith of Noah (v. 7)

[7] By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

I wonder if Noah had ever seen a flood? Maybe not, but he took God at His word when God told him what was coming.

By faith, he built an ark, into which his family entered when the rains began. He acted on the word of God, not on things seen.

These three faithful men speak to us today.

¹⁶ Jude 14-15 tells us that Enoch knew about the coming king and His kingdom. He led a life in light of those facts.

Conclusion:

One, they tell us that living by faith doesn't offer any guarantees about the ease or difficulty of this life or how we'll exit this life.

Abel was murdered; Enoch was directly translated to heaven. Be faithful to God and your life may be easy or hard, filled with good things and abundance or filled with challenges and heartache.

We can live with that because we are looking forward to a ***“better and lasting possession.”*** (Hebrews 10:34)

Two, the stories of these men assure us that living by faith in God will result in impact for God.

Both Abel¹⁷ and Enoch left behind a lasting witness. Noah's faithful life served as a warning to the people of his day. All three left a mark that outlasted their lives.

Three, they tell us - and so does the final verse we'll see today - that living by faith pleases God.

[6] And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for the one who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He proves to be One who rewards those who seek Him.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah all affirmed by their faithfulness their conviction that God exists. He IS.

By your faithfulness to a God you can only see with the eyes of faith, you affirm the same thing.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah also show us that God rewards those who seek Him. Abel and Enoch by obtaining a lasting testimony; Noah, by receiving a rich inheritance in a post-flood world.

¹⁷ ***“He still speaks.”*** Some scholars believe that this is a reference to his blood ***“crying out.”*** (Genesis 4:10) I think it is better to see his “speaking” as the never-ending impact of his faithful life.

So, today, we affirm that God rewards us when we are faithful to Him. To affirm that is to agree with everything Jesus said on the topic. And to affirm that God is a Rewarder of those who seek Him shines a light on His goodness.