

Title: By Faith to Faith to Faith
Text: Hebrews 11.29-40
Theme: Perseverance, not perfection
Series: Hebrews #44
Prop Stmt: Perseverance does not mean perfection
Aim: I aim to encourage my flock to let perseverance in the gospel define them and not a failure.

Read Text:

What do you imagine, when you think of a life of faith? Do you not envision someone who seems unflappable, unshakeable, always confident, secure and focused? From time to time I have told you stories of men and women whose shoulders we stand on. Like these of Hebrews 11, their lives call to us from a distant shore to press on with joy. But, it would not be accurate to paint these people with backbones of iron. Some of them really struggled. I have told you about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and pastor who was part of the resistance in Germany to Hitler and was arrested, jailed and then executed. During his imprisonment, he wrote a poem that captures this idea so well.

Title: Who am I

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune equally, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!

When you read the names of the people in this list, they are primarily not unflappable, unshakeable, confident, and focused. Most of them, like Luther, like Calvin, like Bunyan, like Bonhoeffer, like us, would rather have been left alone. Following God seems like a dangerous thing to do. The no-names are put into the spotlight (not of their choosing) to blaze a trail for the glory of God, yet feeling overwhelmed and inadequate at the same time. We don't want to be here. We don't want the pressure. We resent the expectations but here we are. And, in reality it is a kindness of God to put us in this position. Every single person mentioned in this list was called by God and set apart for a mission that he or she would most likely not have chosen. At the same time, most of these people on this list have some pretty serious failures that would cause any resume reader much reason for pause before hiring them. It seems pretty clear to me that the author of Hebrews is anticipating some of his readers (people like us) getting to this point in his argument and thinking that this is all well and good, but I am no Abraham and I am certainly no Moses. In fact, I am convinced of this because of how the rest of the chapter reads. After focusing in greater detail upon the lives of Abraham and Moses, the author of Hebrews now shows that faith like this was true of all of these other people (named) and all of these others (unnamed). Fact is, we are part of the unnamed people who carry this on. We are part of the people of faith who are responsible to finish what they started. And that is what scares some of us to death because we do not feel adequate for this. We can all point to failures in our lives that make us wonder who we really are, even when others point out areas of faith. And if it weren't bad enough that Satan loves to use past failures to condemn us, our own hearts are capable of doing it as well. But look at these stories and look at these people. This much is obvious....

1. **Pressing on with Joy does not mean Perfection.** (29-31)

This was true of Abraham and Moses and it is certainly true of the rest of the bunch. Notice v.29 where we are told that, "by faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned." Now, if you remember, the Children of Israel were not exactly a picture of confidence in this event, were they? For one, the Exodus text says that they were terrified! They were so completely distraught that they turned on Moses and began accusing him of all sorts of things. Listen to some of their accusations:

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Stop and think about that for a second. Were there no graves in Egypt? What an absolutely ludicrous question! What had they been building for a couple of hundred years? Anyone ever hear of a pyramid? But, this is not a rational and logical conversation is it? Whenever we get angry, logic is usually the first victim. Seriously, did anyone

really think that this is what Moses was up to the entire time? Obviously, these people are not handling this very well at the moment. But, the truth is, they did not stay there in that position and die. Their initial reaction was not confident expectation and while Moses initially put on a brave face, he turned around and yelled at God. And God did not get too rankled by it did He? What happened? They moved, didn't they? They listened to the Word of the LORD through the prophet Moses and stepped onto the ground between the two walls of water. Now, you may argue that they really did not have a choice in the matter, and I would agree with you. But I think that this part of the point. God knows what we are made of. He knows how fearful we can be, so he puts us into situations where we really have to take a step of faith and when we do, He celebrates it. Fact is, at the edge of the water the children of Israel acted just like Moses did at the burning bush. They are not stellar examples of faith the way we normally think, but God is obviously not looking for perfection is he? This is consistent with what Christ said about "mountain-moving faith" in Matthew 17. How much faith is needed to move a mountain, that is, to accomplish the seemingly impossible? About the size of a mustard seed! The emphasis throughout this is not on the size of our faith, but on the power of our God. The AH is very familiar with the Exodus account and that's the point. The deliverance of the children of Israel was not because of them as much as it was in spite of them, but still they had to take the step of obedience. They were saved because they responded in faith to God's Word and the Egyptians were drowned because of their persistent rejection of it.

Notice v.31. Rahab is the only woman, other than Sarah to be named and is probably a bit of a surprise to find her here. She is a Gentile, and was an open-faced sinner even in the pagan city of Jericho. But notice how she is contrasted in this verse. She did not die with the rest who were disobedient, but, because of her faith in this God that she heard about, she gave protection to the two spies. Now, Rahab's story is always a favorite one for an ethics class because she lied about the fact that she was hiding the spies. Listen, God did not commend her because of her lying, but because of her faith. Even the way she expressed her faith was not perfect, but her faith pleased God.

Both of these stories are great examples of how God gets us started by faith. It's like the guy sitting in a boat in the middle of the lake and God says, "Jump in, I'll save you." And the guys says, "But God, I don't know how to swim." And God says, "Don't worry about that, I'll save you." And back and forth this guy keeps arguing with God until God blows a hole in his boat. For some of you, that is what it was like when you finally came to faith Christ. You finally realized that you really had no other choice. For others, you would never choose the trials that you have been called to endure, but God did. He is taking you from the point at which you came to Christ by faith to a life that is increasingly defined as being more and more by faith. (Hence the title: By faith to faith to faith) The life of a Christian is from faith to faith. God keeps taking us to deeper steps of faith because faith is what makes so much of Christ. But, that does not mean that it is easy.

2. **Pressing on with Joy is not Easy.** (32-38)

The only way that you can become a follower of Christ is by faith alone, in Christ alone. What I mean is that you have understand that Christ lived his life in place of your life, so

that he could offer up his life in death in place of your life. The fact is, he did that for you. But, in order for you to be credited with that, you have to believe it and I don't mean to simply believe it as a fact intellectually, but to believe it with your whole being. When you trust in Christ that means that you are not trusting in your efforts. You are not trusting in your good deeds. You are not trusting in your baptism, your confirmation, your observance of communion or church attendance. Ephesians 2.8 says that it is by grace that we have been saved through faith. In other words, Christ's provision for your forgiveness and righteousness was an expression of his grace to you. But that grace to you can only be received by faith. When you trust in Christ, and only when you trust in Christ, you become a follower of Christ. We become a follower of Christ by faith. But, notice this. Faith is not only the means by which we become followers of Christ, but faith is the means by which we grow and continue as followers of Christ. God grows us by taking us from by faith to faith to faith. Each step is a step of faith. Each step is an adventure in which God is stretching us and causing us (whether we like it or not) to believe him even more and trust ourselves even less.

When God called Moses, he did not tell him up front everything that was going to happen. He gave him the big picture and then simply revealed to him one step at a time what he was supposed to do. If Moses knew up front every trial, I can't imagine that he would have signed on. But those agonizing, questioning, perplexing trials taught him (and through him, us) about the character and purposes of God. That is exactly what God does with us. If you are a follower of Christ, you know the big picture. You know that you are going to live with God forever and ever enjoying Him and his people. What you don't know is all the steps that God is going to take you through in order to get you to that point. You don't know how he is going to use you and stretch you and challenge you and thrill you and humble you and purify you and work on you in order to work on every area of unbelief, pride, self-righteousness and stubbornness has been yielded over to him. Nor do you know who all is watching who will take the baton of faith and run with great confidence as a result. Some of the things that God takes you through are hard, and in the moment they do not make sense. Sometimes, you get to see the benefit of your endurance, like these who triumphed through faith.

A. Triumph through Faith – 32-35a

This first group is comprised of people who through faith enjoyed some measure of triumph. They are named then they are summarized. Now, even though these enjoyed some triumph, the triumph did not come easy or without cost. Look at the list:

Gideon was triumphant over the Midianites, but only after he reduced his army down from 32,000 to 300 men. The story recorded in Judges 7 is a classic case of God orchestrating events so that no man could receive glory for the victory. It is both awesome and nerve-racking to be on the front line where God is moving. Being where God has called you is glorious and demanding. In this case, Gideon was able to experience triumph through his faith in what God told him to do.

In Judges 4-5 we read the story of Barak's triumph over the Canaanites. Like Gideon, Barak was a reluctant hero. Deborah was a prophetess who called him to lead and he said that he wouldn't do it, unless she went with him. Moses, Gideon, now Barak all hesitated. This business of acting on faith is not automatic. But, in the moment, on the battle field, when Barak and his vastly out-manned army was staring at the 900 chariots of iron of the enemy, he, on the basis of God's word, attacked and was the instrument that God used to bring about a triumph.

Samson's story of triumph over the Philistines (Judges 13-16) is almost as tragic as it is triumphant. But, in the end, this man, broken by his own failures at last becomes aware of and dependent upon God. And, talk about "bringing down the house" this guy, in his final act, gave up his life, so that his people could be set free. It was an act of faith.

Jephthah's triumph over the Ammonites (Judges 11) was fueled by his resolute confidence in God. And even the prophet Samuel was instrumental in a victory over the Philistines. The author of Hebrews mentions that other prophets were also men of faith and summarizes that God used these people to conquer kingdoms, enforce justice, obtain promises, stop the mouth of lions (I take as a reference to Daniel), quench the power of fire (I take to be Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael – Dan. 3), escape the edge of the sword (David, Elijah and others fit this), made strong out of weakness (Samson, Gideon, and all who being aware of their inadequacy look to God), became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight (David).

What do they have in common? Every single person enjoyed a measure of triumph. Their faith was vindicated in their lifetime. That does not mean that everything about their life was smooth and easy or even faithful. Look no further than Samson! This guy in so many ways was a train wreck! In the end, he finally got it figured out, but that does not mean that he should have been made president of a bible college. His life was full of tragedy of his own making. But, I am convinced that the author of Hebrews lists these people to make us aware that some people, who live by faith through great struggle of endurance, get to see in this lifetime some of the fruit of that. But, that is not the case with all. The text goes on, and it takes on a decidedly more somber tone (right in the middle of v.35). We just reviewed the heroes, the giants, and the victorious, whose names and stories are known by millions. But now we come to another group.

B. "Tragedy" through Faith – 35b - 38

These are the ones who are not named. These are the ones whose stories are not read to little children at night before they go to bed or depicted in Sunday School lessons or reenacted in Veggie Tales. These are the stories of the thousands upon thousands of followers of God, whose faith cost them everything in this life, and in this life, they received no reward for it. Their stories are not heralded around the world, they suffer in silence. While some get to taste a measure of triumph, this group lives under the persistent accusations of the Evil One who can point to the circumstances and attempt to use them as validation of their abandonment by God.

Even in the early church, James' wife was made a widow by Herod's henchman. How did she respond to Peter's wife giving praise of Peter's miraculous deliverance from certain death? Why did God rescue Peter and not James? Why was Isaiah executed in his own land and Daniel delivered in Babylon? The contrast in verse 35 is stunning. The joy of a woman receiving her dead raised back to life because of faith is huge, and the sorrow of torture that continues because of a tenacious, unbending faith is deep. These words describe the stories of the faithful on whose shoulders we stand. The baton of faith that has been handed to you is dented, scratched, and stained with the blood and tears of thousands whose faithfulness was lived out before the eyes of a very few. The reason this baton has made it to you is because these people did not drop it, nor throw it away. Their mocking, their floggings, their chains and imprisonments would have stopped if they would only deny the faith, but for Christ and for you, they would not drop it. These are the ones of whom this world is not worthy. These are the ones for whom we will carry water in the kingdom. These are the ones who left for us the baton of faith, intact. These are the ones who through many dangers, toils and snares not only came, but made it safely home; safe in Christ and safe in the faith, but not safe in this present world. The descriptions are gripping: sawed in two, killed with a sword, abandoned in the wilderness, clothed only with animal skins, destitute, afflicted and mistreated while others who denied the faith in their disobedience dined in comfort and luxury made possible because of they were not followers of God.

I hope that you can see, that those religious pimps who try to get you to prostitute yourself to "Your Best Life Now" and other false gospels only add their voices to that of the Enemy whose teachings mock the misery and the memory of the faithful and distort the gospel of Christ.

So, here it is. It all comes down to this. Living as a follower of Christ in this world is no guarantee that you will enjoy, in this life, the fruit of your perseverance. Some of you will, but others won't. Triumph now, or tragedy now; both can be the fruit experienced in this life by those who live by faith. Triumph of Tragedy in this life is not yours to decide. If we were given a choice, most of us, I am assuming would want to be in the first group where we get to enjoy a measure of triumph and a taste of vindication for our faith. God, however, does not give you the option of which one you will get. But, before you this day (and everyday) is the choice of faithfulness. You don't get to choose the immediate result, but pressing on with joy is worth it, no matter what!

3. **Pressing on with Joy is worth it.** (39-40)

A. **You may not get rewarded at all in this life.**

Notice how these people are described. They are "commended through their faith" yet, they "did not receive what was promised" (YET!!!). Like the three Hebrew boys who stood before Nebuchadnezzar and said, "Our God is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace. But, (I am paraphrasing) even though He can does not mean that He will. It may not be His plan to do so, but regardless we are going to trust him. If he delivers us, we are saved in this life, if he does not, we will be safe with him in the life to come. The fact that

God was pleased to rescue these boys does not mean that they had more faith than the ones that were not rescued. The affects of your faith may not be made visible to you and may not vindicate you in this life. But, yet, it is still worth it because (look at the text), God has provided something better for us! Are you willing to be faithful, even though you may not see in this life the fruit of your endurance? Are you willing to believe God that He is using your perseverance as part of his plan to call a people of faith in Christ to him from every tribe, language and nation. Are you willing to pay it forward?

Even though some of these Old Testament saints received some fulfillment of the promises, none of them lived to see the day of Christ. Christ was the One they had hoped for. Abraham looked for the city whose builder and maker was God. Moses spoke of the perfect prophet who would come. Isaiah (probably the one who was sawn in two) spoke of the suffering servant and the King who reign on David's throne for ever and ever, but did not see that day. He lived to see the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and anticipated the exile of the South. Daniel never saw Jerusalem rebuilt or the glory of Israel restored. They looked for and longed for the day of Christ. But, what they did prepared the way for Christ to come. As the people of God, they ran the race of faith on this earth and passed on the baton of faith to the next and to the next and to the next until it has come down to you.

B. But you are part of the reward of those who came before you.

Their race is not done until all the runners are done. Whenever you run a relay race, you realize that your race is part of THE race. Your race is dependent upon THE race. So, what do you do? You run, knowing that you have teammates who are depending on you. They are standing on the infield around the track cheering you on. Their blood and tears have stained the baton that is in your hand. But that is not all.

C. Those to follow are part of your reward. (Implied)

Some days we run, other days we walk and still others we limp. Yet we press on. Some days we sing, some days we sorrow, some days we struggle. Yet we press on. I have seen women in this church live faithfully before God for 30 years before their husband became a believer. I have seen others live faithfully before God and their husband never did believe. Together, we press on. There is a generation that is coming behind us who will find that the wind of the world will be blow more violently in their face even as the Evil One musters his might for his last stand. To our King and to these believers we owe them a life of faithfulness. What you do and how you live matters. And though you have some scars, and some failures, and a limp or two, this is no time to quit. The gospel is too precious, Christ is too glorious, the church is too beautiful and eternity is too long to do otherwise.

Press on pilgrims, press on with joy. Christ and the Church are worth it.