

“Defining Faith (Part 1)” – Hebrews 10:35-12:2

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bible and lets meet in Hebrews 11...

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. Many view the day as the unofficial start of summer and a time with family to enjoy a car race, playoff basketball, brats and burgers from the grill, and maybe a nice discount on a mattress. It may be that, but we know it is much more than that.

I learned this year that the holiday was originally called Decoration Day and was established to honor those Union soldiers who died in the Civil War. After World War I, the name of the day was changed and the purpose expanded to honor all those U.S. men and women who died in military service. Of course, we know that the family of those brave individuals sacrifice much as well and we honor them and all those who have served among us and had their lives preserved. Thank you for your service.

I tend to agree with Kevin DeYoung, who writes,

“The life of a soldier can demonstrate the highest Christian virtues. While it’s true that our movies sometimes go too far in glamorizing war, this is only the case because there have been many heroic acts in the history of war suitable for our admiration. Soldiers in battle are called on to show courage, daring, service, shrewdness, endurance, hard work, faith, and obedience. These virtues fall into the ‘whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just’ category that deserve our praise (Philippians 4:8).”

And it probably shouldn’t surprise us that...

“Military service is one of the most common metaphors in the New Testament to describe the Christian life. We are to fight the good fight, put on the armor of God, and serve as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. When we remember the sacrifice, single-minded dedication, and discipline involved in the life of a soldier, we are calling to mind what we are supposed to be like as Christians in service to Christ.”¹

Of course, anytime we, as Christians, think about service and sacrifice, we naturally think of Christ. He came not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). He has loved us and given His life as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2). The Bible puts forth Christ as the epitome of sacrifice when it says things like,

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:6-10)

This is the Gospel! Christ died for sinners. Turn from your sin and trust in Him and you will be met with forgiveness of sins and everlasting life with God. Once we understand this—once we embrace it—it’s no

wonder we tend to see shadows of this Good News laced into the rhythms of our life and circumstances—even the holidays that we celebrate.

Our text this morning would have us remember a different group that has gone before—though many of them were soldiers too as it turns out. They are a group characterized by faith. In fact, the chapter we have come to in the book of Hebrews is sometimes called “the hall of faith.” This chapter is to faith what 1 Corinthians 13 is to love. It is the most famous passage on the subject. And this is what we will be considering in this new series.

Perhaps you are wondering why we need a new series for this, after all we are already involved in a series through the book of Hebrews. Fair enough. But the reason I have opted for a little series within our series is because the point of this chapter is to call to mind various lives in the Old Testament. These would have been familiar stories to the original audience, but they are less so in our context. So I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity to take an excursion down memory lane of the Old Testament and spend a little more time rehearsing what these various stories teach us about faith. I’m really looking forward to this. And, for many of you, it will serve as a great survey of quite a bit of the Old Testament, so stay tuned.

As we begin the series there are five points I want us to see in the text. Today we will get to only two of them. Given that it is Memorial Day weekend, a historically low attendance day in church, I have chosen the two by design. The first one will relate a point that the book of Hebrews has been making again and again and so it will be, for most of us, review. The second is one that we will circle back to and expand at the end of the series (Lord willing), so those who were traveling today won’t be at too much of a disadvantage next week. So consider today an introduction to the series. And since we will use Hebrews 11 as the outline for the series, let’s go ahead and read the chapter in its entirety. I invite you to follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. 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.

⁴ 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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 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. 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.

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

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—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ 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—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." (Hebrews 11:1-40)

Hebrews 11 begins with a definition of faith, but it is not an exhaustive definition of faith. It's a definition that applies to the situation of the readers. It highlights features of biblical faith that are important for them to embrace so that they do not fall away from Jesus. But before we get to the features of faith we see in chapter 11, I want us to notice the feature that introduces and concludes this famous chapter on faith. It is arguably the chief characteristic that the author of Hebrews has emphasized throughout his letter, namely, that...

Saving Faith Lasts

The famous "faith chapter" of the Bible is bookended by two commands to persevere, which reminds us that saving faith, by definition, is faith that perseveres. It doesn't fizzle out. There was an old evangelist from the 20th century named Vance Havner who once said, "the faith that fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first." That's an accurate summary of biblical revelation (and a clever use of alliteration to boot!).

Look at Hebrews 10:35 and following...

"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." (Hebrews 10:35-39)

All of the illustrations of faith that are given in chapter 11—and there are around twenty or so—involve men and women who faced great challenges but never abandoned their faith. They are examples of persevering faith. Enduring faith. Faith that doesn't shrink back to destruction. And once all of those examples of faith are called to memory, the author writes this at the start of chapter 12:

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, 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.**” (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

Once we account for this context, we must conclude that the faith on display in Hebrews 11 is faith that perseveres to the end. If someone doesn't maintain their faith, then they don't possess the kind of faith the author has in mind. It's not a saving faith because saving faith lasts.

Of course, the Christian's perseverance can be misunderstood. I think R. C. Sproul strikes the right balance when he cautioned,

*“I think this little catchphrase, *perseverance of the saints*, is dangerously misleading. It suggests that the perseverance is something that we do, perhaps in and of ourselves. I believe that saints do persevere in faith, and that those who have been effectually called by God and have been reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit endure to the end. However, they persevere not because they are so diligent in making use of the mercies of God. The only reason we can give why any of us continue on in the faith is because we have been preserved. So I prefer the term *the preservation of the saints*, because the process by which we are kept in a state of grace is something that is accomplished by God. My confidence in my preservation is not in my ability to persevere. My confidence rests in the power of Christ to sustain me with His grace and by the power of His intercession. He is going to bring us safely home.”²*

If you need evidence of this reality, then look no further than names like “*Samson*” that we find in the “Hall of Faith” of Hebrews 11. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The point for now is that saving faith lasts. But that's not all it does. Second...

Saving Faith Testifies

Look at Hebrews 12:1 again...

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, 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...” (Hebrews 12:1)

The noun that is translated “*witnesses*” is related to the verb translated “*commended*” several times in chapter 11. For example, verse 2—“*For by [faith] the people of old received their commendation.*” Then there is verse 4, which reads, “*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.*” The next verse tells us, “*before [Enoch] was taken [to be with God] he was commended as having pleased God.*” After the catalogue of faithful believers, the chapter ends telling us that they all were “*commended through their faith*” (11:39). The point is that they had received commendation from God as a result of faith. I'll explain the nature of that commendation next week. But this morning I simply want us to see that those who receive commendation through faith testify (or bear witness) to the object and reality of that faith. As one writer has put it, “Faith is invisible, and the *object* of our faith is invisible, but the *evidence* of our faith should not be invisible. The lives we live by faith should be a visible witness or testimony of an invisible reality.”³

That's what all of these Old Testament figures are for us. They are "*a cloud of witnesses*," not in the sense that they are watching us run the race of this life like spectators (though perhaps in some sense they are), but in the sense that they are testifying (witnessing) to the realities of faith. They bear witness to us that life can be hard, but our faith is well placed. They bear witness that God rewards the life of faith and there awaits a crown at the end of the race. They bear witness that faith pleases God. And when we have saving faith our lives bear a similar witness. They should testify and spur others on as the testimonies of these Old Testament saints spur us on.

If our church has a runner on staff it's Caden. Caden is the guy who will get up and run some miles in the heat of the Texas summer. It's gross. I say that because I'm jealous of his level of fitness (and because he is out of town). But we've all known people like Caden who love to run (or at least heard rumors of them). It always seems like I have had friends in my life who derived pleasure from running and I've never understood it. They tell me that if I just commit to it for several months, my body will start enjoying it, even craving it. They seem sincere. It seems consistent with their experience. But I've always been a bit skeptical.

When we lived in Chicago some of my friends were reminiscing about running the Chicago Marathon. They were like, "You should do it Brandon. It's an easy marathon because it's cooler weather and the surface is relatively flat. It will be fun." And I was like, "Yeah, that sounds fun." Listen to me. "It's not fun!" I never go anywhere close to the endurance needed to finish a marathon. Don't get me wrong, I'd really like to do it one day. But I've never actually followed through with a training regimen because never once did I catch myself thinking during a run (even months into training), "Wow, I am really enjoying this!" I never felt the "high." I've never craved to get up from rest and go for a run. I always crave rest when I'm out for a run. That's just how I'm wired. I need to run (and I need to be running more than ever) because there are life-altering benefits and results to running well. But I've never enjoyed the act of running.

So it's not the most encouraging thing to discover that the Bible refers to the Christian life as a "*race*" (12:1). It doesn't promise us a runner's high or tell us that eventually we will start enjoying the course of life. In fact, if we're being honest, it seems that the Bible warns of more pain than pleasure in the earthly life of a Christ-follower. Indeed, there are several Greek words we can translate "*race*," but the word that the author uses in 12:1 is *agona*, from which we get the English word "agony." Perhaps the author and I share the same sentiments when it comes to endurance running. It's agonizing. He's not talking about the leisurely stroll or afternoon jog. He's talking about something more demanding like a marathon.⁴ Something grueling. Something even my runner friends would not eagerly engage in.

But we are called to run the race nonetheless with persevering faith. Why? Because such endurance accrues benefits that are not attainable in any other way. The motto, "No pain, no gain," could fit the Christian experience. But notice that verse 1 calls it a race "*that is set before us*." You don't get to set the boundaries of the race or the distance. Your Creator does. God sovereignly maps the course and all the obstacles and encouragers along the way have been sifted through His sovereign hand. He has set the race before us, which tells us at least that the race is not optional for the Christian and everyone's race is not alike. But the goal in each case is the same, even as the distances and routes vary.⁵ Your race and mine will look different, but the goal for us both is the same—glory to God and Christ's likeness in us.

So how is the race going? If you're like me, it's very easy to feel pretty discouraged by your progress. I tend to feel like I should be a lot further by now than I am, more immune to temptation than my sin proves I'm prone, more steadfast in my repentance than today's confession before God would indicate. But we must remember that God began the work in us and God has committed Himself to complete it (Philippians 1:6). I have really appreciated these words from John Calvin's *Institutes*,

"No one can travel so far that he does not make some progress each day. So let us never give up. Then we shall move forward daily in the Lord's way. And let us never despair because of our limited success.

Even though it is so much less than we would like, our labour is not wasted when today is better than yesterday.”

Still, Paul was right to warn us, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). And this is why we need God at every step along the way of our perseverance. True believers persevere, but they do so because, as we’ve seen, God preserves them and their faith. And He does this by several appointed means of grace to keep us motivated and running.

Every time I have attempted to start training for a marathon, it has been the same thought that got me off the couch to train for what seems to be utterly impossible for me. That thought has been, “Thousands of people successfully run marathons every year and many of them started exactly where I am.” Knowing that someone has gone through the experience and survived (even triumphed) is one of the greatest possible motivations to endure any difficult task or season.

I think that’s why chapter 12 begins the way it does—“*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, 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...*” When we think about Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Joseph and Moses and Joshua and Rahab and David and Samuel and others, we are thinking about people who have run the race before us. They finished. In many cases their races were much longer and more grueling than ours, but they made it. God pulled them through. And their stories testify to us like people on the sidelines of a marathon, saying, “Don’t give up! Keep believing! No matter the cost, get back up. Put one foot in front of the other. God’s got this! He will hold you fast!”

About a year ago I came upon a video that forever shaped the way I visualize such encouragers. Let me show it to you. I don’t show a lot of videos in sermons, but this one is totally worth it.

[Show Clip]⁶

That’s what we need for the Christian race. That’s what we need for our sanctification. That is why we need community. But the point here is that is why we need the stories of faith we find in the Bible. That’s the cloud of witnesses that Hebrews 11 (and this sermon series) is going to explore. We are going to look in detail at most of these stories, one by one, week after week, for a little extended excursion into the Old Testament, a series within our series. We are going to look at the ups and downs of the life of Abraham and hear his testimony saying, “Well done! Just a few meters to go!” And Rahab will cry out, “I know it seems impossible and you can’t see a way out, but keep believing!” And Joseph coming alongside us when we feel like we have nothing in the tank, saying, “Well done, you are keeping the pace.” We will hear the voice of Samuel cry out, “Don’t let them overtake you! He is overtaking you! OveerrrrTAAAKKE!” Many voices. Many lessons. All testifying as a chorus of witnesses to spur us on in faith.

Are you feeling weary from the race? Are you looking at the giant hill in front of you thinking that you’ll never see the other side? In this series we are going to meet many witnesses that have gone before us and can testify that every race has an end. The celebration will be glorious because of what God does in us. He will wipe the sweat from our brow one day and dry the tears from our eyes. And if you don’t believe that, then you really need to join us for this series of sermons. I hope you will.

Let’s pray...

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/remembering-memorial-day-3/>.

² <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-perseverance-saints/>.

³ Josh Black, "God's Hall of Faith, Part 1: The Gallery of the Ancients," a sermon accessed online as of May 26, 2019, at: <http://firstfreewichita.org/sermons/sermon/2010-03-07/-gods-hall-of-faith-part-1:-the-gallery-of-the-ancients>.

⁴ Michael Andrus, "No Pain, No Gain," a sermon accessed online as of May 26, 2019, at: <http://firstfreewichita.org/sermons/sermon/2010-04-11/-no-pain--no-gain>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This clip can be view online as of the date of this sermon at: <https://youtu.be/iLOkA4Coz0A>.