

“Thriving in Suffering”
Hebrews 11:1-40
September 26, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Hebrews 11, the faith chapter, is probably the most well-known chapter of Hebrews. It is important to remember that it comes in the context of a discussion about suffering. The author wants his readers to thrive in a time of suffering, not fall away into unbelief. As we saw last week, the road of suffering always leads to a fork in the road. There is a path of unbelief that leads to death, and there is a path of faith that leads to life. We don't get to choose the precise nature of our suffering, but we must choose our response to that suffering. This is such an important point that the author devotes an entire, lengthy chapter to describe the fork in the road Christians should always take, the path of faith.

Before considering this path of faith, let's consider its alternative. Since faith is trusting God, the alternative is always some form of self-trust. An obvious form of self-trust is trying to address your suffering by some form of human effort. When that fails, there is the response of anger against God for allowing the suffering or despair. A more passive response, and one that is quite common, is the stoic response of waiting it out. The assumption here is that suffering is just a temporary stage in life that will end when this stage of life is left behind. I see this in my own attitude toward this pandemic, as I long for it to be over. I find that I fall into this trap of focusing my attention and longing for the end of the pandemic instead of focusing on trusting God in the midst of the pandemic. It is as if I am assuming that the end of the pandemic will be the end of all suffering, even though I know better. If you think the best strategy for dealing with suffering is to wait it out until the next stage of life, your life will be marked by perpetual disappointment. Suffering will not end in this life.

The Bible teaches that the best strategy for dealing with suffering is faith. It is by faith that we not only survive our trials but thrive in the midst of them. It is by faith that even the most bitter suffering can be turned to joy. I happened to come across a story this week about a Chinese pastor who was imprisoned in a labor camp because of his faith. He was assigned the job of emptying and cleaning the camp latrine. Every day, he would shovel out the foul excrement and take it to a field to be used as fertilizer. He soon discovered an advantage in this assignment. Because of the foul smell, the guards would keep their distance. That distance allowed him to pray out loud and sing hymns, behaviors that were prohibited in the camp. He gave a name to his dung-heap, calling it his garden as he sang one of his favorite hymns. “I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses... And he walks with me and he talks

with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” Hebrews 11 describes not only how that happens, but it also encourages us by offering a multitude of examples of men and women who walked in such faith. We are going to focus our attention on verse 6, which describes the important topic of the object of our faith.

I. God Exists

While verse 1 speaks of the nature of faith, verse 6 addresses the object of faith. This is even more important in our day when there is such confusion about this. How many times have you heard statements like, “You can do anything if you only believe”? That’s a case of faith in faith, and it is completely different than the Bible’s view of faith. We grow in faith not by giving attention to our faith, but by giving attention to the object of our faith. The object of Christian faith is God, that’s what this verse is about.

The context of the verse is the example of Enoch’s faith. **“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”** (v. 5). Enoch is only one of two men in the Old Testament who left this earth by means other than death—Elijah being the other one. The record of his life in Genesis is quite brief, including the fact that he was the father of Methuselah, that he lived a total of 365 years before he was taken up to heaven, and that he walked with God. Hebrews 11 picks up on that last part. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), translates Genesis 5:24 by saying that Enoch pleased God, and that’s the language used in Hebrews 11. The author then picks up on this idea of pleasing God and makes the direct point that it is our faith that pleases God. It is not our performance, our works, our zeal or anything other than faith that pleases God. Then comes the main point concerning the object of such God-pleasing faith: that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

This first object of faith, that God exists, seems at first glance to be a low bar. Is he saying here that the only requirement faith makes is embracing theism as opposed to atheism? He’s certainly not saying less than that, but I believe he’s saying much more. A literal translation of the verse would be, “It is necessary for anyone who comes to God to believe that he is.” It is the language used of God and by God in Exodus 3:14. When Moses asked for God’s name, he said, “I AM WHO I AM.” It means essentially that God alone is God, and by implication, you’re not.

It’s helpful for me to think of this as a reversal of man’s original sin, which was a denial of the “God-ness” of God. Adam and Eve were told by God that they could eat of any tree in their garden paradise except for one. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was forbidden them. That was God’s word. It is

significant that God didn't give them a reason for this restriction. He didn't say, "Don't eat it because it will harm you." He simply told them not to eat it—period. If God is God, that should be enough. But Adam and Eve rebelled when they concluded that God's word wasn't enough.

This brings us to one of the central battles of faith—God's word. To believe that God exists, that God is God, is to receive his word as the ultimate reality. Hebrews 11 provides us with multiple examples of this very thing. Let's look at a couple of them, beginning with Noah. **"By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household"** (v. 7). God had warned him of a coming flood and directed him to build the ark. That was God's word to him, and Noah received that word, believed it, and acted accordingly. Think about the challenge he faced in doing so. He built a big boat far from any sea or ocean, an undertaking that I would imagine took several years to accomplish. Noah wasn't just a shipbuilder. The New Testament calls him a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), which I understand to mean that he warned people of the coming judgment of God and invited their repentance. Every preacher wants his message to make a difference in people's lives, but Noah's preaching fell on deaf ears. But the word of God was more real to him than anything else, so he endured in his ark-building and his preaching.

Abraham receives more attention in Hebrews 11 than any other figure, and with good reason. He believed that God existed, that God was God, and that as God his word was the final word, the most reliable thing in the universe. God came to him with a word to go to a place that he would receive as an inheritance. But notice the significance of verse 8. **"And he went out, not knowing where he was going."** A move is one of the most significant transitions you will ever make, requiring much effort and sacrifice. Imagine doing all that without knowing your destination. This is the way of living by faith. We often think how much better it would be if God were to send us an email with the whole plan of our lives laid out for us. As was the case with Abraham, he doesn't do so. Instead, he puts us in the place where we must simply trust his word. Along the way, God did reveal to Abraham the land promised him. But when he arrived at that land, he discovered that there were people already living there, and it didn't seem that God had told them to turn their land over to Abraham. For the rest of his life, he never owned a single bit of this land other than a cave he bought in order to bury his wife. And it seemed that he was the victim of extortion in the purchase of that cave.

God had also promised Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude. Such a promise must have raised some eyebrows to anyone who knew the marital history of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Infertility had marked their marriage for decades, and now both were beyond the age of normal childbearing. And yet the infertility continued for years after God's promise. So Abraham went to God again and said, **"O Lord God, what will you**

give me, for I continue childless?” (Gen. 15:2). God responded emphatically, promising him not only an end to his infertility but numberless heirs. **“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be”** (Gen. 15:5). But still God delayed. Imagine that Abraham and Sarah are in your small group and week after week they keep sharing their prayer request for Sarah to get pregnant? You look at Sarah and see this woman several decades beyond menopause. Yet that is precisely what Abraham believed would happen. It wasn’t until years later that Sarah finally got pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. But hadn’t God promised countless offspring. Even a two-year old can count to one, and that’s as high as anyone needed to count to number Abraham’s offspring. And then God spoke again, telling Abraham to sacrifice his only son. Abraham was now so confident in God’s word that he was prepared to follow through on that unimaginably horrible act, reasoning that God would raise him from the dead.

These two men, Noah and Abraham, saw God’s word as the ultimate and final reality. Both were willing to bet the farm on God’s word. Noah received God’s word as more real than the apparent foolishness of building a big boat far from the sea. Abraham received God’s word as more real than the comfort of staying among his people and more real than the dead womb of an old woman. Both men faltered at times in their faith, but at the end of the day, they ended up throwing in their lot with God’s word. They ended up coming down on the side of saying, “God is God, and I am not.” What is more real to you? Is it God’s word or your circumstances? That brings up the issue we want to deal with next, which concerns what God has actually promised us in his word.

II. God Rewards

Our object of faith is not only that God exists and that his word is utterly reliable, but also that **“he rewards those who seek him.”** Some Christians have a hard time with the idea of rewards, seeing it as something of a mercenary attitude. It seems to them to condone a seeking of God just to get the reward. In other words, the reward is the ultimate goal, and God is reduced simply to the means to gain that ultimate reward. But notice how this verse clearly rejects such a notion in telling us that what is sought is God himself, not rewards. Christianity is first of all about a relationship with God and how such a relationship can be restored to sinners like us. So the idea is that faith seeks God first of all, but does so with the confidence that there will never be any regret for those who do so. At the end of the day no one will ever say, “I regret having given my life to serve and obey God.”

What are the rewards God gives to those who by faith seek him? Notice the rewards spoken of in Hebrews 11. Noah was rewarded with safety from the judgment of God. The ark that he built is an Old Testament picture of Jesus.

Those who take refuge in him are saved from the only thing that can bring ultimate harm—the judgment of God.

Obedience is another reward for those who seek God. By faith, Abraham obeyed (v. 8); by faith Noah “prepared an ark” (v. 7); by faith Moses “left Egypt” (v. 27); and by faith others “performed acts of righteousness” (v. 33). Obedience is fueled by faith, and the obedient life is the fulfilled life.

Still another reward promised by God is a good future. The text emphasizes that Abraham never received in his lifetime the offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. But we know now that this promise refers to all who possess the same faith as Abraham. As Christians, we are children of Abraham and the fulfillment of this promise. How many people is that? The current world population is almost 8 billion, of which about a third claim to be Christians. Even if as many as two-thirds of those are nominal Christians instead of genuine Christians, that is still 800 million Christians on the planet right now. And that doesn’t include all the Christians who have lived and died through the centuries. God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham in ways that Abraham couldn’t have imagined.

God has promised to those who have faith in his Son, Jesus, a glorious future. **“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”** (1 Cor. 2:9). God has promised everlasting joy (Isa. 51:11). He has promised that **“the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”** (Rom. 8:18). God has promised the end of all sorrow and death. He has promised to bring us back to paradise. No matter how good you are able to imagine these gifts to be that God has promised, they will be better still by far. This is God’s word.

CONCLUSION:

There is one other reward we need to mention, and it is the ultimate reward. That reward is God himself. Walking with God is the purpose for which we were all designed. Fellowship with him is our great reward. This is not a reward that is reserved just for the future. Like the Chinese pastor in the labor camp I mentioned earlier, when God walks with us, even the most vile places become a garden of paradise. I remember hearing Tim Keller say something recently that surprised me. As you may know, he has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In an interview I heard, he said that his relationship with God during this time of suffering has been so much greater than his experience prior to his cancer that it made him question the value of all his previous ministry. In your suffering, you can say to Jesus as I am learning more and more to say, “Jesus, if you’ll walk with me, I’m willing to go anywhere.”

Small Group Discussion Questions
Hebrews 11:1-40

1. If faith is the proper response to suffering, what is your most common wrong response to suffering? Some of the possibilities mentioned were anger at God, despair, trying to fix it by your own efforts, or just stoically waiting it out in hopes that as soon as this suffering is past, the next chapter of life will be largely suffering-free.
2. It is reported of Enoch that he pleased God (v. 5). It is then stated in the next verse that it is faith that pleases God. Can you think of some practical implications of that?
3. We grow not by focusing on our faith, but on the object of our faith. The first object of our faith mentioned in verse 6 is that God exists. In other words, God is God and you're not. In what ways is sin a rejection of this and an attempt to be God ourselves? Can you think of some examples?
4. Part of remembering that God is God and you're not is to regard his word as our ultimate authority. Review how Adam and Eve failed in doing so.
5. Many of these examples of faith in Hebrews feature people who believed God's word against all odds. For example, Noah built a large boat far from any sea. Abraham believed God about offspring when he and Sarah were old and infertile. What are some of the parts of God's word that are seen as foolish and unrealistic in today's world?
6. The second object of faith that is mentioned is that God rewards those who seek him. What are some of your "go-to" promises from God in times of suffering?