

Faith that Endures 5/12/19 Steve Harden

Our reading from Hebrews 10:32-11:2: "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For,

"Yet a little while,

and the coming one will come and will not delay;

but my righteous one shall live by faith,

and if he shrinks back,

my soul has no pleasure in him."

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

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

This is God's word. Well happy Mother's Day. If you're a mother, I want to join with both Jason and Shelly in wishing you a great day. I hope you know you're loved today, by your family and by your church family. We are grateful for you. We are grateful for the work you do with your family. We are grateful for the work you do for the kingdom of God. I think it was

Abraham Lincoln that said: "The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world." And I think he's on to something there. You are a huge part of advancing the kingdom of God in this place, and so, we thank you. For some of you this morning, as we mentioned, it's a difficult day. Perhaps you're estranged from your mom and so it brings up a lot of pain. Maybe, your mom has gone on to be with the Lord and it's a day of missing her. Some of us are single that want to be moms, some of us are married that have not been able to have children yet. I know it can be tough. Please know that you have extended family here and we love you. That's what families do. We may not be able to understand completely, but we do know that Jesus tells us that we can mourn with those who mourn, and we can rejoice with those who rejoice. And that we know. And so, we're here to be with you and for you.

I want to also mention the graduates. This is graduation week, we have several. Thank you all for your hard work. We applaud you and look forward to seeing how God will use you in the days ahead. Thank you for that.

I hope you noticed that John did not read from the gospel of John today. I trust that you noticed that. If you are here for the first time with us, for the last several months we have been working through the gospel of John and it's been a rich, important time for us. But, we're taking a break from the gospel of John for the summertime and we're going to concentrate on Hebrews 11. The thought that came to my mind if I were in your shoes, or your seat, why? Why did you stop something that seemed to be going pretty well and shift gears into Hebrews 11. The reason why is that I think as a congregation, and many of us personally, we need the message of Hebrews 11 in our day. In our congregation, we are in the midst of a lot of change, and change can be disconcerting. We've been through a lot in the last few months and sometimes, many

times, we're tempted to be discouraged. Sometimes there's fear, sometimes there's grief, anger perhaps, anxiety. I get it.

Hebrews 11 has something for us. And if we get it, it will help. But not only as a congregation, many of you are going through some difficult days personally. Some of you battle depression or anxiety, some of you are struggling to have hope that your situation will change, because it isn't what you would want it to be right now. Others, may be grieving, having struggles in your marriage, struggles with lack of marriage, struggles with your children, or your job. Who hasn't had some struggles with their finances? But you may be in the midst of that, you may be in the throes of that. Life is hard. I hope it's not for you right now, but just wait. It's coming. Life can be hard. And when it is hard, it threatens to just suck the joy right out. Who hasn't been there? Whose heart feels like dry shredded wheat sometimes? And you long for joy, you long for the happiness, you long to feel the love that you know you can feel, but it just doesn't seem possible.

This summer, I want to give you some tools to fight the good fight. To fight what you are facing, and I want to fight alongside you. I want you to find encouragement, and perspective that is only found in the gospel of Jesus. I want you to know joy, even through the tears. It is possible. And I know of no better place to find encouragement and perspective, than the book of Hebrews. Especially in difficult days.

See the book of Hebrews was written specifically to encourage, discouraged believers. They were in Rome, and they were about to go through another round of persecution. About fifteen years previous, they'd had a lot of persecution through the edict of Claudius and it looked like the persecution was going to come again, and stronger this time. They were tempted to

discouragement, even discouragement to the point of walking away from their Christianity and going back to Judaism. I would remind you that the name of the book is the letter to the Hebrews. So, they're Jews. And they are tempted, they said, "Look we didn't have all this trouble when we were Jews. And if the faith of our fathers was enough for our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, if it was good enough for them, surely it will be good enough for me. And so, I can separate myself, I can pull back from the gospel of Jesus. I can pull back from my church, from my brothers and sisters and maybe I won't face as much persecution." You see, they're not that much different than we are. What happens to some of us when we get discouraged? When we start fighting within? And there's anxiety, anger and grief or whatever it is that we are facing. Sometimes, we are tempted to pull back from Christ. To pull back from the people of God who love us, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes, it's easier to pull back than to lean in and lock arms with brothers and sisters in a cause.

The preacher to the Hebrews would say, "Don't pull back. Lean in. Go through it together." Listen, Hebrews 10:22 and following, he says: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water," he says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir one another up in love and good works, not neglecting to meet together," or pulling back, right? "As the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near." The preacher to the Hebrews says, "Lean in! Push in. Go further, go deeper. Don't pull back."

Now in chapter 11 he shows us how to endure, to be strong in the faith. He will tell us, "Trust Him. Trust Him. Trust the God who saved you. Trust Him to do what He said He will do."

Faith is the means by which we fight discouragement and grief and mourning. Jesus calls to us, down through the ages, trust me. Trust me. Remember what you know to be true. Remember what I have promised you. Trust me. If we can grab hold of this message, if we can grab hold of the message of Hebrews 11, if you can make it a part of your DNA, you will have a faith that endures, a faith that perseveres during dark and difficult days. You can live a life full of purpose and meaning. You can have joy and peace amidst the tears, but you have to get this one right. I believe it will be well worth our time this summer: to explore, to examine, to analyze and apply this one truth so that we might have a faith that endures.

Chapter 11 is the most extended, and the greatest description of faith we find in the Scriptures. We're going to look at two verses this morning, just 1 and 2. I want to introduce you to our subject. These are foundational verses for everything that comes after, and I want to do it with three 'faith is' statements.

Faith is the reality of what you hope for in the future. Faith is the reality of what you cannot see. Faith is how you please God.

So, let's start. Faith is the reality of what you hope for in the future. The very first verse of chapter 11 says: "the assurance of things hoped for." Let me suggest four truths for this. First of all, faith is rational. Faith is rational. You must think and reason if you are to have faith. It has to be a thoughtful faith. That's the kind of faith it's talking about in this verse. Faith is not simply a feeling. Now I love Rogers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" and if you'll remember the opening scene has Curly riding on his horse through corn that's this tall, and I've yet to find that kind of corn in Oklahoma, but lo, I digress, right? But he's singing: "Oh what a beautiful morning! Oh what a beautiful day! I've got a wonderful feeling, everything's going my way!" He

had a feeling. Everything's going his way! He was optimistic that he was going to get the girl! Biblical faith is not ungrounded optimism for the future. It's not about that at all. Biblical faith is not positive thinking. We use the term, 'hope,' often in the context of something of in the future that we're uncertain about, right? I hope that one day Thunder will get past the first round of the playoffs. It's uncertain. I hope you feel better soon. I don't know that you're going to feel better soon, but I'm hopeful. My desire is uncertain but it's for the future. We hope it doesn't rain today. We don't know! But we hope. So first of all, faith is rational. It is thoughtful.

Secondly, it is certain. Faith is certainty. It's a rational, reasonable certainty of an invisible reality. It is something that we cannot apprehend with our five senses. But nonetheless, we know it's real. The word assurance here, in the "assurance of things hoped for," means substructure, or foundation. Something that is strong. In the documents of the age, this word assurance was actually used as a technical term describing a title deed to a piece of land. As long as you had that deed, the land was yours. It was a reality, right? The assurance, the foundation, that which is unshakeable and sure. Faith is the confident assurance of the reality that you can't see.

Thirdly, faith is based solely upon what God has said is true. The important criteria of faith is not, do you believe? It is not primarily about the strength of your belief. That's important in Tulsa. It's important that you understand it's not primarily about how much faith I have, or how strong my faith is, rather, the most important criteria is: in whom do you place your faith? That is what is most important. The question is not, are you sincere or confident? But the real question is: is the one in whom you've placed your faith trustworthy? It's all about Him, and not my strength. If He is trustworthy, then you know what He says is trustworthy and reliable.

Therefore, I can believe it. But it's all about Him. If He's not trustworthy, what He says is not trustworthy, and we have both feet planted firmly in midair. If He is trustworthy and what He says is true, then we can have absolute confidence even though we cannot see the reality of what He has promised. Do you see? Even though I can't see it, even though it's invisible to me, even though it's in the future, and I haven't been able to grab hold of it yet. We have hope, the assurance of things hoped for. We have hope because God is reliable and He's trustworthy. And his word is reliable. It is why we can say that there is no uncertainty at all in faith. It's not wishful thinking. It's not uncertain, but a rock-solid foundation. We are confident in the trustworthiness of our God.

So, we see first of all faith is rational, faith is certainty, faith is based solely on what God has said to be true, fourthly, faith is hope for the future. Faith is hope for what is coming ahead. So, what has God promised to occur in the future that we are to have faith for? Let me suggest four promises that God has made for your future. First of all, you can be certain that He's coming back. He left some 2,000 years ago, but He's coming back. 1 Peter 1 says: "Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." In His word, He has promised, I'm coming back for you. And He's coming. We live in a fallen, broken world. I don't have to remind you of that. You see it, it's in your face every day. Evil seems to triumph all the time. Injustice seems to prevail. Sickness, disease, death come. But it's not always going to be that way because Jesus is coming back. When He comes back, He'll bring with Him a reign of righteousness, justice, truth and equity. We know the reality of what is to come by faith. We know it. We don't have to question.

Secondly, you can be certain that when you die, you will experience physical resurrection from the dead. 1 Peter 1, again: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” So, what is he saying? He’s saying, this hope is sweet for you and for the ones that you love who suffer. This is so sweet. Whether it’s a physical malady, or depression, or addiction, whatever it is. You know it’s not right, it hurts, but we can confidently say and remember, it’s not always going to be this way. Because God has told us that in that day, when we die, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. And so, in spirit we will be with Him, but even beyond that there is coming a day that He comes back and He’s going to resurrect these bodies and they’re going to be just as real as they are right now, except they’re not going to hurt anymore and you won’t suffer anymore. There will be no more tears, no more grief, no more mourning. That is your reality, my friend, if you know Jesus Christ. No more of this sickness crud. One day, you will have a body that is strong and perfect, and you will never get tired, and you will never get fatigued, and you will never be sick. No more will you experience those things.

Thirdly, you can be certain that any suffering that you endure will be as momentary light affliction when you see Jesus. My friends, I know you’re going to suffer, and I know the ones you love are going to suffer. Some of you will suffer a lot. Sometimes, that suffering is in the hands of another person, and you’re not going to see justice this side of the grave. I’m sorry, the books don’t always balance this side of the grave. Sometimes, you suffer from an illness. Sometimes your finances just won’t seem to work out. So, what do you do when these things

seem to be so unfair? What do you do? Well, we're tempted to wallow in self-pity, amen? We are! We are tempted to wallow in self-pity. But self-pity has never got us anywhere. It's easy to moan and complain when life isn't fair. It's not the way I wanted it to be, that I don't deserve what I've been given, and that may be true. But there's no hope in self-pity. There's no joy, there's no victory, it's useless, and frankly it's kind of pathetic. But my friends, you have reason to believe and to think and to trust in the promises of God, what He says is true. And some day, in your future, no matter how severely you've suffered, He says that it will be as momentary light affliction in light of what He is going to do for you in the future. Have hope my friends. It's not always going to be this way. By faith, believe and then you can rejoice through the tears.

The saints of old in this chapter 11 are here to serve as our guides and mentors in this thing called faith. They were commended, or rewarded, because they believed God's word about the future. As we go through each of these stories, they are not just given to inform us or make us more knowledgeable about the Old Testament people. Instead, they're to encourage us and teach us. For example, we have Noah. God told Noah "It's going to rain," and Noah had to say, "What's rain?" Right? God had to tell him, "Well that's water falling from the sky. You've never seen that before. And when the water falls from the sky, it's going to flood the earth, and there will be no more dry land, so what you're supposed to do Noah is to build a boat." It'd be like building an ocean liner in Oklahoma, and Noah believed Him. He believed what God had said about the future was reality. He trusted God, and so for the next 120 years he built a boat. Amidst mockery and ridicule and scorn, Noah believed God and counted the flood as a reality not yet seen. It was going to happen. He trusted. You don't do something for 120 years and not really believe it's going to happen. The word of God for Noah was more sure than the fact that it had

never rained. He couldn't base his actions on his experiences. He believed God's word. Furthermore, it was perfectly rational for Noah to build a boat. If he believed God's word. See? You don't have to check your mind at the door. If God said it, then it's true.

What about the believers at the end of chapter 11? Starting in verse 35, it says: "Some were tortured refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking, and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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 and mistreated." Why would you do that to yourself? It doesn't make sense. Why would you put yourself in that position? To put yourself in that position is not rational unless you believe the promises of God. And if you believe the promises of God, then it's perfectly rational to give yourself over to suffer and to be stoned and sawn in two. Faith is the certainty of what you hope for in the future as reality. Listen to Martin Luther, he said: "If we consider the greatness and the glory of the life we shall have when we have risen from the dead, it would not be difficult at all for us to bear the concerns of this world. If I believe the word, I shall on the last day after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say, 'Oh that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ.'" Oh, that I would have allowed myself to suffer more! Faith is the reality of what you hope for in the future.

But secondly, faith is the reality of what you cannot see. That's the second part. The conviction of things not seen. Faith is not only the unseen future realities, but it's believing what is true right now that I can't see. Those invisible realities that occur right now as we are here. Let

me suggest three of those. First of all, it's just the gospel. The good news that I have been forgiven and made right with God. I have to trust that what God says is true, because I can't see it, I can't feel it, I can't hear it. The senses don't give that to me. I have to trust what God says is true, that Jesus lived 2,000 years ago. He lived a perfect life, then He died to purchase my ransom. He rose again on the third day. He ascended to heaven, and even now He's interceding for me. And all of that, somehow, makes a difference today, in my life. Just to believe that takes faith in unseen reality. None of that can I see. I don't always feel forgiven. I don't always feel blessed. I don't always feel rescued. But you know what, it doesn't matter. What is true, is true. Faith is believing the unseen reality. The gospel.

Secondly, we live amidst a great throng of spiritual beings. In Hebrews 12:1 after he's gone through all these Old Testament saints, he says: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," now I don't know how all this works, but somehow, we are surrounded by those saints who have gone on before. It's like we're down on the playing field and we're working it through, we're fighting, and the saints of old are in the stands and watching us. There's such a great cloud of witnesses. And I don't know about you, but that encourages me. To fight on. To believe, to have faith. That's just true. I don't know how it works.

But secondly, I see that Satan is a spiritual being that I cannot see. In 1 Peter 5 it says: "Be sober minded, be watchful, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." Look, Satan is real. He's a real being. He's not a philosophy, or a thought, or a force, he's a real being. We have an enemy, a sworn enemy. It's a great error not to acknowledge that you have an enemy of your soul. Just know it. Now frankly, Satan is not

omnipresent, so Satan probably, we'll never deal with Satan himself, because we're just not that important. But he has this whole army of henchmen, called demons.

Listen to Ephesians 6: "Finally be strong in the Lord, in the strength of his might, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood," those things that we can see, right? "But against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." He has his henchmen, and we fight against them. There are enemies of your soul.

But also, there are angels. I love the story in 2 Kings 6 about Elisha. Well Elisha had repeatedly thwarted the king of Syria, and the king of Syria hated him. Well, they found out where he was and at night his army surrounded the city. They were going to take Elisha's head. The next morning Elisha's servant woke up to see all these armies, and he said, "Oh what are we going to do Elisha? We're surrounded, there's no way out." To which Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes." Do you remember what happened? He saw this great army of unseen warriors, and chariots, and horses surrounding them. And all of a sudden, he wasn't scared anymore. They were a reality that he couldn't ordinarily see, but he was given a glimpse behind the curtain.

I can tell you a personal story, in Ponca City, in my former pastorate, I had a young lady who somehow was more spiritually attuned to those kinds of things than I am. And she pulled me to the side after a service one morning and said, "Steve, I don't know what you're going to do with this but when you were preaching I saw two big white robed men standing on either side of you while you were preaching and their feet were about a foot off the ground." I don't know what to do with that. I can't explain it, but I have no reason to believe that she wasn't telling me

the truth. I can't tell you how often when I get down, and I think about what she saw that day, it encourages me. There are spiritual realities that are occurring all around us that we just cannot see, unseen realities.

But thirdly, something that we cannot see is that God is orchestrating everything in your life. He is sovereign. That means He's king over His universe, and He's good. Even amidst great suffering and trials, He is sovereign over His kingdom and His people. He is the God of the universe. Let me read verses from Romans 8, beginning in verse 28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." Is that true? You can answer me. Yes? Is that true, Ethos? Yes. Thank you. I know I ask a lot of rhetorical questions. Here comes another actual question. Verse 31: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will he not also with Him graciously give us all things?" Is that true? Yes. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." Is that true? It is true. And you can build your life on it. You can stand when all the rest of the world is going away. You can stand on these truths.

You have a choice to make. Will you believe what He says is true? Will you believe that which is occurring right now, that you cannot see, is still true? Is it true that all things in our lives are woven together in this great big tapestry by a great weaver who is accomplishing His will and bringing all things together? I have to admit I'm always, it would seem, on the back side of that tapestry, and all I see are knots, and pulls, and threads. Sometimes, you can look back and say, "Ah, that's what He was doing," because He kind of turns it around so we can see it. But we're not even promised that until eternity. Choose to believe, my friends, that what He says is

true. I don't know why He chooses some for great suffering, and some not. But again, and again, and again, I have to ask myself, what is true? I know three things: that God is absolutely sovereign, that He is perfect in love, and that He is infinite in wisdom. And sometimes, that has to be enough. Sometimes, that just has to be enough.

Think about Joseph, early in his life it was the pits. He was hated by his brothers, well, he was kind of a snot, but he was hated by his brothers, he was sold into slavery, then he was thrown into jail because he wouldn't betray his master, right? He helped two people in the royal court that promptly forgot him for two years. When he finally came to a position of great power and authority, when he finally revealed himself to his brothers, do you remember what he said about their evil deed? He said: "You meant it for evil, God meant it for good." God was orchestrating everything in his life that so hurt him, and yet he said, "God meant it for good."

Let me ask you to consider, to what extent do you comprehend that there are unseen realities going on around you right now? Through your tears, do you believe that what God says is true? Do you believe that He's at work in you and your situation? Working for your good and His glory? Do you trust Him? Faith is the firm confidence of future and present unseen realities.

And finally, and quickly, faith is how we please God. Look at verse 2, "For by it the people of old received their commendation." Commended here, or commendation, means approval. These Old Testament saints received their approval from God because of their faith. Now for me, this is a really hopeful verse. The reason why it's hopeful is because sometimes, I look at my sinfulness and I think there's no way God can be pleased with me. I can think back about my past sinfulness and I think, "Boy I blew it. Oh God, certainly you can't be pleased with me. You can't commend me for my life." But then I see this, and I say wait a minute, it's not

about my obedience. Now hear me, we should obey. But the commendation of God is not about our obedience, it's about our faith. Think about the lives of these Old Testament saints. There wasn't an angel among them. And really, most of us won't sin as bad as what these guys did, I trust, I hope. Yet still, they're here in Hebrews 11, the hall of fame of faith, and it says that God is pleased with them. What this does is put God being pleased with me on me a shelf that I can reach, because what He expects of me is to believe Him, believe in Him, but believe Him. We all can do that. No matter how bad we've screwed up in the past. Is what He says true? Then let's believe Him.

A couple years ago, I worked with a man named Glenn in Lubbock, Texas. We were working together, developing his leadership skills according to how God had wired him, but in our conversation, he asked a question that has stuck with me ever since, and it's been almost two years now. It's become a defining question for me, a question that I come back to time and time again, and one that I want to ask over and over and over again this summer, for me personally, and perhaps it might help you as well. I stuck it on my monitor at home in my home office as a constant reminder. His question to me was: "What would my life look like if I totally trusted Him?" In all things. I plan to continue to explore that question, personally. But I'm asking you, would you consider it with me this summer? Would you make it a part of your life to just ask that question? What would my life look like if I totally trusted Him? We have great guides in Hebrews 11, men and women who stand ready to help us, and I look forward to the journey with you. Let's pray.