

# Faith: Living Today in the Light of the Future on the Basis of God's Word

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Preacher: Michael Reader-Harris

[ 0 : 00 ] Our Bible reading this morning comes from Hebrews chapter 11, verse 17, all the way through to chapter 12, verse 3, which you can find on page 1210 of the Church Bibles.

Page 1210 of the Church Bibles. By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. Even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead and saw, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

[ 1 : 12 ] By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

By faith, Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born because they saw he was no ordinary child and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as a greater value than the treasures of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith, he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger.

He persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith, he kept the Passover and the application of blood so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

[ 2 : 24 ] By faith, the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith, the walls of Jericho fell after the army had marched around them for seven days.

By faith, the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. And what more shall I say?

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign enemies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released, so that they might gain an even better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning. They were sewn in two. They were killed by the sword.

[ 3 : 55 ] They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and ill-treated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. Since God had planned something better for us, that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked

out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. The words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

[ 5 : 26 ] Amen. Sorry, I put my microphone on slowly.

Well, this series isn't called High Speed Hebrews for Nothing. So, as we go through it this morning, our passage, I'm sure there'll be someone here who's disappointed that the particular Old Testament saint that you love best, I didn't cover.

Because I'm not going to say something about all of them, and the rest of you will be quite relieved that I chose to omit some. I've had to try and think out why the writer to the Hebrews might have chosen these characters, and what as a whole is the point that he is making, and that we need to hear this morning.

You have your sheet on the back of the notice sheet. I've, after thinking and praying, I've come across those three points, really, that seem to come out to me most from the passage.

Several of these people made a challenging choice. They all had a prolonged perseverance, and they defied death, or they averted death.

[ 6 : 48 ] There's some third point there that seemed to me to be important, and you can see if you can do better. I'm sure you can. The two characters that are covered in most detail in the whole passage are Abraham and Moses.

So I'm using them particularly as my sort of pattern for these Old Testament saints. Because both of them made a vital beginning with God.

They both made a challenging and a costly choice. Last week you'll have heard how Abraham said yes to leaving Ur, and he goes out, not knowing how it'll all work out.

That's faith. He trusts God for the future on the basis of what God has said. But I'm not talking about that.

That was last week's passage. This week we're looking much more at Moses. And he too makes a very costly choice. And we all know the story of the baby and the bull rushes.

[ 7 : 59 ] We all know how Pharaoh's daughter is the first financier in the Bible, because she goes down to the banks of the Nile and draws out a small profit. But the point that our writer is making is nothing to do with that very early part of Moses' life.

It's actually what happens, say, 20 years on. By then Moses is grown up. He's in the palace. He's known as Pharaoh's daughter.

And he has a choice. He could have stayed there. He could have done some good for God's people by being an important person in the palace. Or he could have just enjoyed living the royal lifestyle. He could have gone for leisure, pleasure, and treasure. But he chose to move from the very top of the pile to the very bottom.

He chose to go from being one of the elite to one of the slaves. Why did he do that?

[ 9 : 15 ] Well, because God's people were important to him. They were oppressed. He thought it through. It says he regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

He thought it out. Faith wasn't a sort of sudden rush into something. He thought out what he had to do for God. And the particular sin he was avoiding, I think when he says the fleeting pleasures of sin, it's more not what we immediately think of, but he's avoiding turning his back on God and his people.

The sin he was in danger of was apostasy, turning away from God. But he said, I'm going to be with God's people. He looked to the future.

He looked, as it says here, to his reward. But for both Abraham and Moses, that costly choice, the one that takes you from Ur into Palestine, or the one that takes Moses from the palace to God's people, wasn't enough.

Both of them lived lives of prolonged perseverance. I mean, Abraham, it says, lived in tents all his life. He must have looked back sometimes to the comforts of Ur, to a place with walls and heating and some level of plumbing.

[10:59] I mean, I was relieved three years ago when my annual tent sojourn at Scripture Union Camp came to an end after 25 years. And that was only a week in a tent each year.

It wasn't like living there all the time. And even then we had indoor loos and things. It was a bit of a cheat, really. So Abraham lived his whole life wandering in the promised land.

He kept going. He also had to wait a long time. He had to wait a long time for his heir.

Isaac only arrived years after the time when a baby could possibly have been expected. The point is he persevered.

Moses' perseverance is just summed up in one sentence. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

[12:12] It's not 100% clear what that sentence is referring to. In terms of the order of events, I mean, he's chosen to leave the palace and later on he's going to keep the Passover, that would seem to suggest that this leaving Egypt is the time when he goes to Midian.

And that seems reasonable enough. In that case, his perseverance was the sort of perseverance that means keeping going when life's not very exciting.

You know, he's given everything up and yet, well, he's in Midian and he's looking after sheep and is this really what, the question in his mind would be, is this really what God wanted for me?

Am I really doing everything that, have I left everything for this? Or it might be that the order of the events as described is not critical.

So he's actually referring to Moses' perseverance when he's leading the people of God through the wilderness. We certainly saw in our home group, and I'm sure you'll have been in the same in yours, as we went through Exodus, how Moses had to persevere.

[13:31] I mean, even his own brother, Aaron, turned out to be extraordinarily unsatisfactory, particularly over the incident of the golden calf. So how does Moses keep going?

How does he persevere? Well, it says here, he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. We'll come back later to how we see him who is invisible.

But there are those two key things, I think, that we're told about Moses. He made his costly choice because he was looking to his reward, and he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Fixing one's eyes on the invisible God, now that's faith. That's what it's all about, keeping going when you can't see. Well, you can see in the end, you see the end, but you don't see all the details around you here and now.

I mean, as we start thinking about how this applies to the people to whom our writer is writing, there are people who attempted to go back to Judaism.

[14:49] And one of the attractions of Judaism was it had a visible temple and very visible priests. And you could actually see what was going on in a way that is sometimes harder for us as Christians.

We have a better priest, but he's in the heavenly sanctuary in heaven. And we have to look to him in a different way and see him in a different way.

We have to see him who is invisible. And then for both Abraham and Moses, there's a third great exercise of faith.

A costly choice, a prolonged perseverance. The choice comes at the beginning of their lives, or perhaps in their 20s or whatever. There's perseverance in the middle.

But then there's a particular act of faith for each one of them, which I've described as death defied or death averted. Abraham is willing to sacrifice the miraculous child he's been given.

[15:57] He believed that had Isaac died, he would have been resurrected. Moses followed God's instruction, and the angel of death passed over.

Have you ever thought about what that must have been like in those houses that night? Imagine the boy, family with boys, imagine the boys going, Daddy, you have actually killed the lamb, and you've put the blood out, haven't you?

You've done all that we expected of you. And Daddy says, yes, I've done it. I've prepared, as we were told. Moses listened to God.

He trusted him. That's faith, and he did what he was told. And then the Israelites went through the Red Sea. They went down and up with the water on either side.

A picture, perhaps, of baptism and resurrection. A picture, perhaps, here of, we think of death and resurrection. That seems to apply to both the stories that we've just heard.

[ 17 : 11 ] In each of them, that's what their faith involves. Looking at death, facing it, and indeed, the possibility of resurrection.

Now, those same three, the choice, the perseverance, and death, defied, averted, I wonder if they were, if that same group of three applies to the very first people we had last week.

I wonder if Abel, Enoch, and Noah, perhaps, illustrate that. Each of them just, being as it were, just one of those three, rather than all three.

I mean, Abel, who made a good choice of sacrifice, the one who brought the better offering, Enoch, about whom we know very little, but he walked with God all through his life.

He persevered until God took him. And Noah, who averted death by building his ark.

[ 18 : 25 ] Could those three be that same pattern again? Now, in the remaining characters, of whom there are many in the story, we don't see all those features poured out in one life.

I'm not saying they weren't there, but we just see little details about them. I mean, just to take a few examples, I promise you I wouldn't take them all.

I mean, there's Rahab. She made a costly choice to help God's people. That cut her off from her own people.

But she made a costly choice. Or in terms of perseverance, we might think of those who go round Jericho seven times.

I mean, not just once. How people must have laughed as they went round and round the city. I mean, what a stupid way to conquer Jericho.

[ 19 : 27 ] But they trusted God. They may have felt foolish, but their faith was rewarded because they persevered.

But actually, when we look at the different characters, most of them actually are people who defy death, really. They're mostly in that last group of my three thoughts.

And it's difficult to be sure what all the incidents in verses 33 to 38 refer to. Some of them are easy. Those who through faith conquered kingdoms.

Well, we think of Joshua. We think of David. We think of other people as well. We think of those who administered justice.

Well, again, I suppose David would be the classic example. Or Solomon. They also received words of promise from God. David and Solomon often scores the answer to these questions, I think.

[ 20 : 33 ] Shut the mouths of lions. Quench the fury of the flames. Well, I guess that's Daniel. Daniel and his companions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Or if you prefer their names in Greek, Ananias, Azarias, and Mysel. If you're a nine o'clocker, you probably go for those, for their Greek or sort of virtually Hebrew names.

I mean, they're a group of people who made a costly choice for God at the very beginning of Daniel. They decided that they would go with God and that they wouldn't eat the, in their case, everyone is a different issue.

For them, it was about what food you ate. But, they made their choice. They persevered. They persevered. Daniel, being prepared to pray visibly.

And then they faced death. Daniel, the lions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the fiery furnace. We think of those whose weakness was turned to strength.

[ 21 : 42 ] I guess that could be Samson. I don't know who you have in mind. We think of him at the very end of his life when his hair grows back and he pulls down the temple. On top of the Philistines.

But actually, there were lots of people in the Bible who exemplify weakness, being turned to strength. You might think of Gideon, who was the least in his family, from the weakest clan in Manasseh.

Do you remember how he started out with 32,000 men to go and fight? But God only let him take 300. And he won. Or we might think of Barak.

He faced, I think it was Sisera, the Canaanite. And Sisera had 900 chariots of iron, which is a sort of ancient equivalent of having tanks in your army, whereas other people have only got horses or something.

If you're lucky. And yet, he won too. Or David, I suppose, to go back to great David again. David was the one who faced up to the nine-foot giant, who was a sort of one-man, mean, fighting machine.

[ 23 : 03 ] And he won too. Then 35a, we get to women received back their dead, raised to life again.

I think we're probably now hearing the stories of Elijah and Elisha. We're at that moment when Elijah raised the son of the widow of Zarephath, and Elisha raises the son of the Shunammite woman.

But actually, I picked out examples where faith was rewarded in this life, then, at once.

But actually, the passage is much broader than that. 35b, there were others who were tortured, refusing to be released, so that they might gain an even better resurrection.

That probably refers to the seven sons and their mother who were killed in the time of the Maccabees. You'll find the account in 2 Maccabees, chapter 7.

[ 24 : 09 ] If you go home and look up your apocrypha, there are three of the sons and their mother clearly profess their faith in the truth of the resurrection to everlasting life.

So that's just 200 years or whatever before the time of this letter. So there were those who trusted God but weren't delivered now, only to be delivered, but they do go to glory.

There were some we don't know about for certain. They were sawn in two. There doesn't seem to be any examples in either the Old Testament or the apocrypha of someone who's sawn in two.

Their tradition says that it was Isaiah who was sawn in two, but there's no actual Bible verse for that one. and at the end of the list there were those who wander about.

The world was not worthy of them, living in caves and in holes of the ground. Not always the saints in glory in this life.

[ 25 : 31 ] life. But each of them acted in the present, in the light of the future, on the basis of God's word. They made costly choices, they exhibited prolonged perseverance, and they defied death.

Sometimes delivered, sometimes not. But what's the connection with the rest of our author's argument?

I mean, the point is he's writing to people who attempted to drift away, turn away, throw it all away. Well, he says, the Old Testament saints, they didn't throw it away.

They kept going. They kept trusting God. They kept on in faith. It wasn't easy. It won't be easy for his readers, but they had to keep going.

they were tempted to go back to the world, to the Judaism, to the world of the Old Testament. But our author keeps saying that everything about Christianity is better.

[ 26 : 43 ] A better word, a better rest, a better priest, in a better sanctuary, pleading a better sacrifice. And again, his favorite word appears in verse 40.

I'll read 39 and 40. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Even the great saints, he says, from the past, the ones that you look up to, will only get to glory with us, with you.

Don't miss out, don't go back. There's something better. Don't lose it. It isn't easy to finish well, and so we end up with our final three verses, which urge us to consider Jesus.

The last three verses talk about a race. It's interesting to think about the race. I'm not quite certain what the cloud of witnesses do in the race.

[ 28 : 04 ] It's not made 100% clear. We naturally tend to assume that the witnesses are the crowd, that we're running along, and they're on either side cheering us on.

And that might be right. Or are they in fact people who've already finished the race, and they're examples. Maybe they could be both, I suppose. They finish the race, and then they come and sit in the stands and watch us.

That would achieve both, I suppose, at the same time. But I think it's more that they're examples.

They're the people who show us how the race can be run, and they've actually already themselves run it.

And there are two things we require for good race running. He says, one is negative, to throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles.

I mean, runners don't run in overcoats, even in Glasgow. Swimmers just wear swimming costumes.

[ 29 : 11 ] As they come up to the race, they take off whatever surplus clothes they have and dive in. You know, I'd always much prefer to swim in a tie.

You know, I don't feel, I feel underdressed. But actually, the point is that we have to throw off every weight, even these, and off we go into the water.

Because we want to have nothing encumbering us as we swim. I guess that there are different weights for all of us.

I mean, some of us, the weights may be to do with our work. Work's really important and it's God given. But maybe through ambition or through just the sheer exhaustion of it all, work can be something that provides a weight on our Christian lives.

things. Maybe relationships can be a problem. People who don't help us in our Christian lives.

[ 30 : 19 ] Particularly, perhaps, a problem for, you see it for, amongst teenagers particularly, falling into a group that don't help them along the way. would it be awful to say that as Christians we can be, a weight can be too many committees or too many things that are not really the, the point about the weights is that they're not bad, is that they're not inherently bad.

They're the sort of things that you can, that can be that are good up to a point, but somehow, one too many can wear you out. It could be something like a hobby, something that dominates us in a way that we're not meant to be.

I guess we can all think about the sort of weights that might be holding us back in the Christian race. And run with perseverance, the weight is marked out for us.

We're not actually racing against each other. We're simply racing to do what God wants for us as individuals. Seeking not to be encumbered either by these weights or by sin.

And the other is positive. Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. So he's gone before.

[ 31 : 50 ] He's run the race. He made the immensely costly choice of coming to earth for us. He persevered to the end.

He endured such opposition from sinners. He went through death to resurrection and won. He's our example, but also the one through whom we approach God.

God. So how do we fix our eyes on him? How do we see him who is invisible? Well, a lot of the answer is the one you probably expect me to give.

It's by reading scripture. As we read scripture, we're able to see Jesus. Particularly as we read the gospels, we see him. We see how he lived, how he died.

But I guess there's also a few other examples we might give as well. We might do it through hymn singing.

[ 32 : 58 ] Some of the songs we sang this morning, freely you gave it all for us. In fact, I think almost any of the songs that we've sung so far will enable us to fix our eyes on Jesus. Sometimes the important Bible reading is something we generally do in the quiet of our homes.

But as we go through life, the hymns that we've sung this morning can be the things that come back into our minds and we fix our eyes on Jesus again. Or there may be particular psalms.

Lift up your heads or your gates and be lifted up ye everlasting doors and the King of glory shall come in. That's 24, Psalm 22.

Different psalms help us to think about Jesus, to fix our eyes on him, to make sure that we don't turn away, leave the race.

It's a marathon or a long swimming race depending on what sort of races you want to think about. For different ones of us there may be different challenges this morning.

[ 34 : 08 ] there may be a costly choice we have to face. But for all of us it's that keeping going day by day, still reading my Bible, still coming to church, still praying, still coping with the Christians who annoy us.

not that there were any here, of course. Before he fell into a hole this morning. All of us have to make sure that we keep looking to Jesus, seeking that through him and in him we may come to the heavenly country because we trust God's word.

Let's pray as we sit. heavenly father, we're excited again to hear about those saints who went before and all they did.

Thank you for the ones that we rejoice in, that saw your power in the flames or shutting the mouths of lions.

But thank you too for those like those in the time of the Maccabees. who are utterly faithful and yet died, but who with us will be in glory.

[ 35 : 38 ] So help us to persevere today. Faithful to you, for we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.