

# HONEST FAITH

SERIES: STORIES OF FAITH,  
HEBREWS 11



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Hebrews 11:32-40  
Seventh Message  
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*Hebrews 11:32-40*

This morning, we are looking at the end of Hebrews 11. Next week, Paul Taylor will conclude our series on Stories of Faith by looking at the first few verses of Hebrews 12, but today we will finish chapter 11.

This past week, I've been watching a bit of the Olympics. I haven't followed them as closely as I usually do. Maybe it's because all of the "Tokyo 2020" logos keep throwing me. I'm not sure. One of the things that always draws me to the Olympics is the stories of people who have worked their whole lives and made so many sacrifices to get to those games in the hopes of winning a medal. Yet, at the end of the day, only one athlete walks away with the gold. It is a bit overwhelming to think of all athletes whose dreams come true at the Olympics and all of the athletes whose hopes are dashed. I wonder how many of those athletes have prayed for a certain outcome—probably one that puts them on the medal stand! I wonder how many of those athletes leave those games with unanswered prayers?

I wonder how many of us here today have unanswered prayers? Maybe not prayers for a gold medal. Or perhaps you have prayed for a gold medal—God bless you. I imagine that we all have unanswered prayers. I am confident that we all have unanswered prayers. As we get started today, I want to ask you to take a moment to pause and talk to God about your unanswered prayers. Specifically, I want you to ask God to bring to mind a particular prayer that has been left unanswered. A desire that you have that has not been fulfilled. Something that you have asked God for that you have not been given. Take a moment to ask God to bring something specific to mind for you. Keep that prayer, that desire, in mind, and we will come back to that as we go on.

If you have been with us this summer, you know that we are nearing the end of our series in Hebrews 11. All summer, we have been exploring this great chapter all about faith. We have seen some truly incredible acts of faith in this chapter so far. Noah builds the ark and saves his family from the flood. Abraham trusts God even

when asked to sacrifice Isaac. Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Incredible faith. I hope that your faith has been stirred in response to these stories.

In many of these stories, we have started to see a pattern emerge: someone shows incredible faith, and God shows up in incredible ways. This is an amazing pattern, and it is meant to inspire our confidence in God and exhort us to develop a similar kind of faith.

However, when it comes to our unanswered prayer—when it comes to that unanswered prayer that you have in your mind right now—there is a danger implicit in hearing these stories. The danger is that we begin to make a rule out of this pattern. We see people in the Bible demonstrating incredible faith, and we see God showing up in incredible ways, and we begin to think that there is a causal relationship between our faith and God's actions. That is, we begin to believe that if we have incredible faith, then God will show up in incredible ways. If I do my part and believe, then God will do his part and answer my prayer.

Sometimes this happens. It is a pattern for a reason. But sometimes it doesn't. What happens when I don't have incredible faith? Or what happens when I do have faith and God doesn't come through? The whole thing falls apart.

Here is what we are going to see in today's passage: sometimes God uses our weak faith and leads us into victory. Sometimes God sees our strong faith and leads us into suffering. Sometimes God will respond to incredible faith by showing up in incredible ways, but God can also show up in incredible ways when we have almost no faith at all. Sometimes God will respond to incredible faith in incredible ways, but sometimes God seems to not show up at all even when we believe with all our hearts that he will. What is going on here? Why does God work this way? Let's dive into the text to see what the Lord has for us this morning.

## When weak faith leads to victory

Our passage for this morning is Hebrews 11:32-40. Let's start reading in verse 32.

### Hebrews 11:32-35a:

**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.**

Most of this chapter has focused on a few people's faith; Abraham and Moses are the most prominent. Then here in verse 32, six specific people are named, and all of the prophets are included as well. The author is moving from a more in-depth look at the faith of a few to some broader trends of faith throughout the Old Testament.

As he does, he starts in a very strange place: the judges. Four judges are named: Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. I find it incredible that these four men show up in Hebrews 11. If you were to read the book of Judges again, I think you would too. The period of the judges was a low point in Israel's history—a very low point. The people were not walking with God. The judges—those people whom the Lord used to deliver his people from time to time—are more noteworthy for their failures than for their faith. Let's take a few minutes to remind ourselves about these four judges.

First, Gideon. As far as judges go, Gideon was not so bad. In fact, in the end, he ends up winning a remarkable victory of 300 men against an army of 135,000, and God does most of the fighting for him. His story starts with him hiding in a hole in the ground for fear of his life. When God calls him to save Israel, three times, Gideon asks God to prove himself before he is willing to trust him. In the end, Gideon does exhibit faith, but it takes him a long time to get there.

Next is Barak. Barak is too frightened to actually do what God has asked him to do. Instead of exhibiting faith when God promises to give him victory, he looks to Deborah, another judge, and says, *I'm only going if you come with me!* God still brings victory, but Barak's fear

gets in the way of his faith and keeps him from trusting God as he should have.

Then we get to Samson. Oh, Samson. Samson is the worst of the judges. He is a narcissistic, hedonistic womanizer who is completely full of himself and has hardly any regard for God. Eventually, Samson's pride and lust leave him with both eyes gouged out, grinding at the mill of the Philistines like a beast. Yet, despite all of his flaws, God continued to use him and the small amount of faithfulness in him to deliver his people from their enemies.

The last judge mentioned here is Jephthah. Jephthah is not much better than Samson. When God calls him to deliver Israel, his first impulse is not to trust God. Rather, he tries to manipulate God. He says, *If you give me victory today, I will sacrifice to you whatever walks out of my house when I first return from battle.* God gives him victory, but when he gets home, his daughter walks out to greet him. Jephthah ends up sacrificing her to God. Fear, manipulation, human sacrifice, and yet a small amount of faith that God uses to bring victory.

If I was writing Hebrews 11, these judges are not the people I would give as examples of faith! But the author is trying to help us see something here. Sometimes God shows up when people exhibit extraordinary faith. But sometimes, he shows up when people exhibit hardly any faith at all. Sometimes God takes narcissistic, ego-centric, power-hungry, manipulative people with meager faith, and he works a miracle.

Here's how we usually expect things to work: If we have a strong faith, God will grant us victory over whatever circumstance we face. This is the Red Sea paradigm. Moses shows up at the Red Sea, being chased by the Egyptians. It looks like hope is lost. Then he holds up his arms, and God parts the sea, and the people walk through on dry ground. Incredibly strong faith leads to incredible victory! Sometimes this is how God works.

But not always! Sometimes, God gives us victory even when our faith is weak. Sometimes, God takes the smallest amount of faith and brings incredible results. Yes, God is looking for strong, deep, unwavering faith in him, but he can also use weak, fear-laden faith to lead us into his best for us.

Why do these four judges show up in Hebrews 11? To teach us that God is not limited by the weakness of our faith. That is a message that some of you really

need to hear today. God is not limited by the weakness of your faith.

I have seen how destructive it can be to think that your weak faith is what is keeping God from answering your prayers. When my sister was in high school, she began to experience chronic headaches. These were debilitating headaches. For several years they were nearly constant, and they began to dictate her entire life. She had to quit playing soccer. She had to skip parties and events. She missed some school. She couldn't do all kinds of things that teenage girls are supposed to enjoy doing.

These headaches continued into college. One day while in college, she met some Christians who wanted to lay hands on her and pray for her healing. They were a part of a tradition that regularly did this and had seen God perform many healing miracles. My sister agreed, so they set up a time to pray over her. After praying and praying, her headaches did not go away. At this point, this group of Christians turned and placed the blame squarely on my sister. "If only you had enough faith, God would heal you. The reason that he hasn't healed you is because your faith is too weak and you don't trust God enough."

Absolutely not! God is not limited by the weakness of your faith. The almighty God of the universe will not fail to work a miracle when he wants to because you don't have enough faith. To think otherwise is to have an incredibly small view of God.

Let's go back to your unanswered prayer. How strong is your faith that God going to answer your prayer? To what degree do you believe that God can and will answer that prayer? Is your faith a bit weak? Don't be discouraged. God can take the faith of a mustard seed and move mountains. If God wants to work a miracle, he will. The weakness of your faith does not limit the power of the almighty God.

## **When strong faith leads to suffering**

Just after the judges are mentioned in Hebrews 11, we read of several women and men who exhibited an incredible degree of faith. When we read of people who "stopped the mouths of lions" (verse 33), we think of Daniel in the lions' den. When we read of people who "quenched the power of fire" (verse 33), we think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace. In both of these cases, these men chose to trust God in incredibly dangerous situations, and God came through and saved them in dramatic fashion.

But as we continue reading, we hear of many people who did not experience such a happy ending.

### **Hebrews 11:35b-38:**

**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.**

Here, we read of people who suffered, people who were tortured, and even some people who died. No one is mentioned by name, but the author is alluding to many well-known biblical characters. Many of the prophets were mocked and beaten. We know that Jeremiah was flogged and stoned by those who ridiculed him. According to tradition, the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two at the end of his life, and the prophet Uriah was killed with the sword. We know that Elijah and Elisha walked around the desert and in caves dressed in animal skins, poor, afflicted, and mistreated. Because of their incredible faith and faithfulness to God, the author says that the world was not worthy of these heroes of the faith. And yet, despite their great faith, these men suffered, and some even died in service to God.

Sometimes, God responds to our incredible faith in incredible ways. Sometimes, God take a faith that is strong and leads people into victory. Sometimes, God even takes a faith that is weak and leads into victory. Sometimes, however, God takes a faith that is strong and leads people into suffering.

We wish this weren't the case. We wish that if we just had enough faith, God would show up in incredible ways. That would be so simple. That would be so nice. Sometimes that happens, but sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes even the strongest faith ends in suffering.

For the past several years, some close friends of mine have been struggling with infertility. They had prayed and prayed for a child, and after a few years, they found out they were pregnant. They were overjoyed. But soon, there were complications, and the doctor said they were losing the baby.

In the days and weeks that followed, these friends faced a decision to accept the doctor's words and start to move on or pray for a miracle. They chose to pray. They believed with all of their hearts that God was going to perform a miracle. Their faith was as strong as I have seen. But in the end, the doctor was right. God chose not to perform a miracle. They were beyond devastated. Strong faith. Deep suffering. Because these friends chose to have faith, the pain of an unanswered prayer ran that much deeper. And yet, these friends chose to continue to trust God.

There are two false premises that we have to watch out for when it comes to unanswered prayers. The first is that the weakness of our faith is limiting God from answering our prayers. We have already seen that this is not the case. The second false premise is that we can manipulate God to do what we want if we just have strong enough faith. If I believe deeply enough, then God will answer my prayer. But this is not the way God works. God is not limited by the weakness of your faith. But neither is God coerced by the strength of your faith. God is not coerced by the strength of your faith.

Strong faith is amazing. It is what God is looking for, and it is a gift from God. However, do not fall into the trap of thinking that you can manipulate God by having enough faith. You can't! You can't make God do what you want by believing that he will do it. To think otherwise is to embrace paganism. Paganism was the religion of the day in the ancient world, but it is still alive and well in our world today. It is the view that God or the gods must be appeased so that they will treat me favorably. A little song. A little dance. A sacrifice here and there. Just the right amount of faith, and God will give me what I want. It doesn't work that way. No amount of faith will coerce God into doing what you want him to do.

Think again about your unanswered prayer. Some of you have an incredible amount of faith that God can and will answer that prayer. Praise God. I hope that he will. But are you prepared for the fact that he may not? Are you ready to continue trusting him even if your prayer goes unanswered? Even if God chooses to lead you into suffering? That kind of faith is hard to cultivate, but it is the kind of faith that God is looking for in us.

## **Cultivating Honest Faith in Jesus**

In the last two verses of the chapter, the author will point us to the proper object of our faith.

### **Hebrews 11:39-40:**

**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.**

These verses conclude not only our passage but the entire chapter of Hebrews 11. After recounting the faith of these Old Testament saints and the faithfulness of God to them, the author tells us that none of them received in full what was promised to them. There was something better than being saved from the flood. There was something better than being delivered from Egypt. These promises were amazing, but from the very beginning, they were meant to point to something greater: Jesus. All of the promises in the Old Testament are meant to point to Jesus. The Old Testament saints did not always realize this, but we can see it clearly from this side of the cross.

Jesus didn't just save us from the waters of the flood; he saved us from eternal separation from him. He didn't just provide a ram so that Isaac didn't have to be the sacrifice; he gave his life as a sacrifice for our sins. He didn't just part the Red Sea and deliver the people from slavery in Egypt; he delivered us from our slavery to sin so that we could be free in him.

All of this shows us that God is not looking for some kind of abstract faith, some kind of belief that everything will be okay, that it will all work out in the end. No, God is looking for faith in Jesus. Jesus is the only proper object of faith. He is the one that we must look to for salvation. Jesus is our Rescuer. Our Redeemer. Our Savior. He is the fulfillment of all the promises of God. He is the fulfillment of all of our unanswered prayers as well.

Think again about your unanswered prayer. Sometimes, we get so caught up in the outcome of our prayer. Is God going to come through or not? Is he leading me into victory or suffering? This can lead us to a place of evaluating our faith. Is my faith strong, or is it weak? Do I really trust God, or do I not? But if we get too hung up on the outcome of our prayer or the quality of our faith, we miss the whole point, which is Jesus. Whether our faith is strong or weak, whether God chooses to lead us into victory or suffering, every situation we find ourselves in is an opportunity to encounter Jesus. Every unanswered prayer that we have is an opportunity to go deeper with Jesus. Because he is there with us in our unanswered prayers. He is here with us in our unanswered prayers. Whether our faith

is strong or weak, whether he chooses to answer our prayer in the way that we want or not, he is with us. And he loves us. And he wants to know us and to meet us in that place.

So here is my final encouragement to you this morning. Come to Jesus with whatever faith you have. Just come to him. Talk to him. Be honest with him about your faith. If your faith is weak, if you are full of doubt, tell him. Don't try to muster up the faith within yourself. Just tell Jesus that you are having a hard time trusting him.

Or if your faith is strong, but you've realized this morning that you are trying to manipulate God through your strong faith into doing what you want, just tell him. He already knows. He knows you better than you know yourself. Just tell him. Be honest with him.

This is what Jesus is looking for from us. An honest faith. He doesn't want us to pretend that we are better than we are. He doesn't want us to fake it until we make it. He wants us to talk to him. He wants us to be honest with him. This is where real faith starts—with honesty.

## Conclusion

In Mark 9, Jesus has an encounter with a man whose son has been possessed by a demon. This demon is ruining this boy's life, throwing him to the ground, causing him to convulse and foam at the mouth. This father is desperate for help, and he brings his son to Jesus. Here's what happens:

### Mark 9:21-24:

**And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. 22 And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." 23 And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible for one who believes." 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"**

*"I believe. Help my unbelief." That is honest faith. Jesus, I believe. I do believe. There is a part of me that trusts you. There is a part of me that believes that you can help me. That's why I am here talking to you. But Jesus, there is also a part of me that does not believe. That is a part of me that is full of doubt. That is a part of me that questions whether you can or even want to answer my prayer. But here I am. I believe. Help my unbelief.*

That's beautiful. That's honest. That's faith. Coming to Jesus as we are. Without hiding. Without trying to muster our own faith. Without trying to manipulate him. "Here I am, Jesus. I believe. Help my unbelief."

I want to invite you to pray that prayer. Take that unanswered prayer that you have and bring it to Jesus with whatever amount of faith you have. Don't judge your faith. Don't get caught up in "what if God does or doesn't answer my prayer?" Just bring your request to Jesus. Lay it at his feet and pray, "Jesus I believe. Help my unbelief."