

Week 10 Devotional™ Reading

A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews

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God-Focused Faith

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, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. – Hebrews 11:17-19 ESV

There will be times when the life of faith seems illogical. By definition, it involves "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Faith has a future orientation. It looks ahead. It maintains an eternal perspective. And because of those things, on this earth, it will be tested. Abraham had been promised a son by God. There would be no plan B, not adoption of an heir, no acceptance of another son born through a slave girl. God had promised a son born by Sarah, in spite of Abraham's old age and her barrenness. But God had also promised a multitude of descendants and a land in which they would live. And God kept His word.

The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." – Genesis 21:1-7 ESV

God came through. When Abraham had celebrated his 100th birthday, God provided him with a son. He and Sarah had to have been beside themselves with joy and a deep sense of relief. They had waited so long. They had hoped for a son and now God had delivered on His promise. And they would enjoy every moment of every day with their young son, Isaac. Every time they looked at him, they would remember the faithfulness of God and realize that this young boy was the hope they had been waiting for so long. Or was he? The day came when God gave Abraham the hardest choice he would ever make.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." – Genesis 22:1-2 ESV

Can you imagine the shock? Can you begin to feel the sense of incredulity Abraham must have felt? As God acknowledged in His statement to Abraham, this was his only son, the son he loved. And now God was asking, no He was commanding Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice. He was telling Abraham to take the life of his own son, his only son, the one who was the key to Abraham becoming the father of a multitude of nations. Or was he? You see, as much as we may be appalled at the idea of God commanding Abraham to make a human sacrifice, we must

keep in mind that, as the Scriptures say, this was a test. It was God's way of determining if Abraham had transferred his hope in God to his son. Had the gift he had been given become more important than the Giver of the gift? It is interesting to note the response of Abraham to this shocking news from God. The Scriptures somewhat matter-of-factly record: "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him" (Genesis 22:3 ESV). He didn't argue. He didn't remind God of His promise. He didn't accuse God of unfairness or injustice. He simply obeyed. While he probably did not understand all that was going on, he kept trusting God. When his young son asked him, "My father, behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7 ESV), Abraham calmly replied, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8 ESV). Whether Abraham was simply hiding the grim reality from his son in order to protect him or if he truly believed that God would provide a substitute lamb, we are not told. The very fact that Abraham ended up binding his son, placing him on the altar and raising the knife to take his life, gives us ample evidence that he was willing to go through with God's command. In his heart of hearts, Abraham trusted God and believed that He could still keep all His promises even if Isaac had to die. In fact, the author of Hebrews tells us, "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19 ESV).

Abraham passed the test. God sent an angel to stay his hand and prevent the death of Isaac. The angel of the Lord said to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12 ESV). And then God miraculously provided a ram caught by its horns in a thicket, to act as substitute sacrifice. Isaac was spared. Abraham had shown that his faith was in God, not his son. He had proven that he trusted the Giver more than he did the gift. His hope was in God and he had full assurance and a strong conviction that God was going to do all that He had promised, and nothing, even the death of his own son was going to prevent it from happening. He had faith in God.

God had asked Abraham to do the unthinkable. He had commanded Abraham to take the life of his only son, his most precious possession. Isaac had not been simply the fulfillment of a long-awaited dream, but he was the hope of God's promise of multitude of descendants taking place. Or was he? You see, the problem we all face is the tendency to take our eyes off of God and place them on things other than Him. Isaac was not to be Abraham's hope. He was just a boy, who would grow up to be a man. But Isaac would not bring about the fulfillment of God's promises. Only God could do that. No man or woman will ever be able to bring to fruition the promises of God. For the divine will of God to happen, it must be accomplished by God Himself. We must never take our hope off of God and place it on anyone or anything else. Abraham's test was one of allegiance. It was a test of his hope and, ultimately, a test of his faith. Now that he had a son, was he going to transfer his hope to Isaac and off of God? He passed the test. His faith was in God. His assurance of things hoped for was in God. His conviction of things not seen was in God. He had an eternal perspective that would not allow the illogical and seemingly unthinkable to deter his faith in his faithful God.

Tested by God

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, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. – Hebrews 11:17-19 ESV

This story deserves a second look. There are four little words that should raise a certain amount of suspicion and create a bit of confusion in our minds – “when he was tested.” The account of this story found in Genesis says, “After these things God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1 ESV). God tested Abraham. The Hebrew word for “tested” is *nacah* and it can mean “to test, try, prove, tempt, assay, put to the proof or test” (Hebrew Lexicon :: H5254 (KJV). Blue Letter Bible. Web. 8 Feb, 2016). We might ask ourselves, why would a good God test Abraham? We might also ask why an omniscient, all-knowing God would *have* to test Abraham. What was the purpose of the test? Was it to prove, test or try Abraham’s faith? Wouldn’t God have already known what the outcome of such a test would be? Didn’t he already have a ram ready to serve as a substitute offering in place of Isaac? Was God really waiting to see what Abraham would do? It would seem that God was testing Abraham, not for His own enlightenment, but for Abraham’s. God already knew the outcome. The psalmist would have us remember that God is all-knowing.

O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I’m far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord. – Psalm 139:1-4 NLT

God did not need to know what Abraham would do. But Abraham needed to know what God would do when he was fully obedient – even in the face of an impossible, illogical request. The test was for him. There is another story that speaks of God’s testing. It is found in the book of Exodus. It took place early in the story, immediately after their deliverance from Israel and the miraculous parting of the Red Sea.

*Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” And he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and **there he tested them...** – Exodus 15:22-25 ESV*

In recording this event, Moses used the same Hebrew word, *nacah*. God tested them. But notice the difference between the two stories. In this case, the people, who had just witnessed God’s divine deliverance, arrive at Marah and immediately begin to complain about the lack of water. Remember, they had seen God send ten plagues on the people of Egypt. They had seen

Him destroy Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. But when they found themselves in the wilderness without water, they grumbled and complained, saying, "What shall we drink?" They didn't even take their problem to God, the one who had delivered them. They complained to Moses. And Moses took the need to God. Despite their complaining, God took care of their need and provided them with sweet water. There he tested them. But again, who was the test for? Did God not know how they were going to react? Was He not fully aware of their hearts and completely unsurprised by their reaction? Wasn't He the one who led them right to that spot, fully knowing that there was no water? This was a test for them.

And God, after providing them with drinkable water, said to them, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer" (Exodus 15:26 ESV). God wanted them to know that He could be trusted. He wanted them to know that He was all-powerful. He was testing their knowledge of Him and their faith in Him – for their benefit. The lack of water at Meribah showed them that they did not really know or trust God. It revealed their lack of faith. When they had stood on the banks of the Red Sea with the army of Pharaoh bearing down on them, Moses had told them, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today" (Exodus 14:13 ESV). And God had delivered them. But as soon as they faced their first problem, they doubted God. They failed the test.

But Abraham passed his test – with flying colors. God was not surprised. He knew Abraham would be obedient. He even had a ram caught in a thicket to serve as the stand-in for Isaac. But that day Abraham learned a great deal about himself and about His God. His faith grew. His hope in God's promises increased. His conviction in the things promised by God, but not yet seen, deepened. The test was for Abraham's benefit, not God's. He learned what true obedience to God looks and feels like. In a way, Abraham was testing the faithfulness of God, counting on Him to come through. He even told his son, Isaac, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8 ESV). He was putting all his faith in God, counting on Him to spare his son or even raise him back to life should he have to follow through with God's command. God was not testing Abraham in order to see what he would do. The test was so that Abraham could see what God would do and grow in his faith. The apostle Peter gives us an insight into the tests we face in this life.

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. – 1 Peter 1:6-7 NLT

Like Abraham, our faith will be tested at times. We will find ourselves facing situations and circumstances that will reveal whether our "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Will we allow the lack of water to cause us

to complain? Will we balk at God's seemingly unreasonable request and refuse? God knows what we will do. He is never surprised. But the question is whether we know what God will do? And are we willing to trust Him with the outcome? Paul gives us a word of encouragement.

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! – 2 Corinthians 4:17 NLT

God Prevailed

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. – Hebrews 11:20 ESV

Isaac, the son of Abraham, would live a long life and father two twin sons, Jacob and Esau. He would also inherit the same promise from God given to his father, Abraham.

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed... – Genesis 26:3-4 ESV

When Isaac realized that his days on earth were coming to a close, he determined to bless his sons, beginning with Esau, the first-born of the two.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.” – Genesis 27:1-4 ESV

Of course, little did Isaac know that his wife, Rebekah, had overheard his instructions to Esau. She immediately conspired with Jacob, her favorite of the two sons, to trick Isaac into giving him the blessing reserved for the first-born son. In her defense, Rebekah thought she was doing the right thing. Like her mother-in-law, Sarah, Rebekah was barren and unable to have children. But God came to her and promised to give her twin boys. He told her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23 ESV). She believed that the blessing of Isaac was the key to God’s promise being fulfilled, so she concocted a plan to make sure Jacob received the blessing of the first-born. And Jacob went along with it because, technically, the birthright was his. Esau had unwisely and impulsively sold it to him for a pot of stew (Genesis 25:29-34). Driven by his hunger, Esau had flippantly forfeited his right to the blessing

So, when Rebekah approached Jacob with her plan, he was reluctant, but eventually complicit in carrying it out. And their deception worked. Unknowingly, Isaac gave the blessing to Jacob that had been intended for Esau.

*“May God give you of the dew of heaven
and of the fatness of the earth
and plenty of grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.*

*Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!" – Genesis 27:28-29 ESV*

But what is interesting about this story is what the author of Hebrews says about Isaac. He writes, **"By faith** Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau." But wait a minute! He was deceived. He did not knowingly bless Jacob. He did so because he was tricked. How is that an example of faith? Well, first of all, we have to realize that the blessing he gave, fully believing he was giving it to Esau, was an example of faith. It was based on things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen. He was having to trust God to bring it all about. But even when Isaac realized what had happened and that he had been deceived by his wife, though angry, he remained faithful. "Then Isaac trembled very violently and said, 'Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? Yes, and **he shall be blessed**'" (Genesis 27:33 ESV). Isaac had faith that God would fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham and had passed on to him – in spite of Rebekah's deception. Things had not turned out quite like he had planned, but he was willing to trust God with the future outcome. Even to the point of blessing Jacob a second time before he moved to Paran in order to escape the wrath of this disgruntled brother.

"God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" – Genesis 28:3-4 ESV

Notice what Isaac did. He went back to the promise of God. In spite of all that had happened, he kept his focus on what God had said. He did not know the full ramifications of all that had transpired. He didn't even like it. But he was willing to trust God with it. He had no idea what was going to happen in the years ahead. He was blind to all that God was going to do with and to Jacob. But he believed that God had meant it when He had said, "I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 26:3-4 ESV).

And years later, when Jacob had returned from his self-imposed exile and his father Isaac was near death, God visited him.

And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." – Genesis 35:10-12 ESV

It is interesting to note that God changed Jacob's name. In Hebrew, his name meant "he takes by the heel or he cheats." This was a result of what happened at the time of Jacob and Esau's births. Esau came out first, but the text tells us, "Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob" (Genesis 25:26 ESV). But God would change Jacob's name. And the name change, while subtle in Hebrew, *Ya`aqob* to *Yisra'el*, was incredibly significant. Israel means, "God prevails." In spite of all the trickery, deceit, human flaws, misplaced blessings, and convoluted circumstances surrounding Jacob's life, God was in charge. His will was being done. His promise was being fulfilled. And it was in this fact that Isaac had placed his hope and conviction. He had faith that God would do what He said He would do. So, by faith he invoked future blessings on his two sons, trusting God to do what only He could do.

By Faith, Not by Sight

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. – Hebrews 11:21 ESV

Jacob, the son of Isaac, had lived a full and far-from-boring life. He and his mother had conspired to deceive Isaac in order to receive the blessing reserved for the first-born son. Even though he and his brother, Esau, were twins, Jacob had been born second, coming out of his mother's womb hanging on to his brother's heel. Which is how he got his name, *Ya`aqob*, which meant, "he takes by the heel or he cheats." Jacob would live up to his name, living a life in self-imposed exile after having cheated his brother out of his blessing. Upon leaving, Isaac reiterated his blessing to Jacob, saying, "God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" (Genesis 28:3-4 ESV). Even while traveling to the land of Haran where his uncle Laban lived, Jacob had a dream and received a vision and a word from God.

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." – Genesis 28:13-15 ESV

God reaffirmed the blessing Jacob had received from Isaac. In spite of the deceit and trickery Jacob and Rebekah utilized to get the blessing, God clearly affirmed it. It had been His plan all along, as He had told Rebekah before the boys were even born. "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23 ESV). So, Jacob would spend years living his life in exile, living in a foreign land far away from his father and mother. Yet in time, Jacob decided to return home. During his time in Haran, he had deceived and been deceived. He had married multiple wives, who had born him children. He had grown rich and prosperous. But he was ready to go home and face the anger of his brother Esau. On his way, he had a divine encounter with God. He actually wrestled with God, demanding that He bless him. And God did, saying, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28 ESV). Jacob had spent his entire life wrestling with God, trying to do things his way. And when God said that he had prevailed, he wasn't saying that Jacob had bested Him, He was simply saying that Jacob had managed to survive. The Hebrew word is *yakol* and it means "to be able, be able to gain or accomplish, be able to endure, be able to reach." Jacob had endured his exile. He had survived his own life of deceit. He was going to gain all that God had promised. And he was going to learn that it was all

God's doing, not his own. Jacob would make it safely back to the land of Canaan, receive a surprisingly warm welcome from his brother, Esau, and have yet another visit from God.

God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." – Genesis 35:9-12 ESV

Jacob would father twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son and his favoritism would eventually cause his other sons to sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph would end up in Egypt where, through an amazing chain of God-ordained events, he would become the second most powerful ruler in the land. In the meantime, Jacob and his remaining sons would find themselves dealing with a terrible famine in the land of Canaan, which would eventually force them to seek out aid in the land of Egypt. This would lead to a surprising reunion with Joseph, who would end up not only forgiving his brothers, but providing them with protection and land. "Thus Israel [Jacob] settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen. And they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly. And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years. So the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were 147 years" (Genesis 47:27-28 ESV). When the time came for Jacob to die, he asked Joseph to bring in his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh so that he might bless them. In an interesting turn of events, Joseph presented his two sons to Jacob in order for him to bless them. He held Manasseh, the eldest, in his left hand, so that Jacob could easily bless him with his right hand. He held Ephraim in his right hand, so that he would receive the blessing of the second-born from Jacob's left hand. The Scriptures tell us "Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth" (Genesis 48:12 ESV). With his head bowed, he did not see his father, Jacob, switch his hands and place his right hand on the head of Ephraim, the younger of the two. The passage makes it clear that Jacob's eyesight was dim from old age and he could not see. With his hands switched, Jacob pronounced his blessing:

"The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." – Genesis 48:15-16 ESV

When Joseph saw what had been done, he tried to get his father to correct his apparent mistake. But Jacob refused, saying, "I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations" (Genesis 48:19 ESV). You might think that Jacob, because of his poor eyesight, inadvertently and mistakenly gave the blessing of the first-born to

the wrong son. But the mention of Jacob's poor eyesight is there to indicate that he was having to trust God for what he was doing. He had received a divine directive from God to give Ephraim the blessing reserved for the firstborn. It was God's will and what Jacob did, he did by faith. He had to trust God with the outcome. He did not fully understand it or know how it would all turn out, but he knew that God was in control. He didn't need strong eyesight, he simply needed strong faith. Jacob would die in the land of Egypt, never returning to the land of Canaan, but he trusted that God would bring his people back to the land and fulfill His promise to make them prosperous and to bless them. Jacob blessed his two grandsons, "bowing in worship over the head of his staff" (Hebrews 11:21 ESV). His hope was in God. His assurance was in the promises of God. He had a strong conviction that God knew what He was doing and he willingly obeyed God's wishes. Jacob might not have always lived his life by faith, but he ended it that way – trusting God for the fate of his family and the future fulfillment of His promises.

Faith Down to His Bones

By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. – Hebrews 11:22 ESV

Ever since Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, he had spent the majority of his life living in the land of Egypt. He had spent the early portion of his time there going through periods of blessing followed by times of adversity. He would experience both feast and famine, success and failure, but God was always with him. Eventually he would become the second most powerful figure in Egypt, a remarkable turn of events that was not lost on Joseph. He told his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20 ESV). Joseph saw the sovereign hand of God directing his life and accomplishing a far greater and grander purpose than his brothers could have ever imagined when they sold him into slavery all those years ago. Joseph’s incredible and meteoric ascension to the upper echelons of Egyptian power was the work of God. It had all been part of God’s divine plan for fulfilling His promise to Abraham

You have to go all the way back to Genesis 15 to see how all of this fit into God’s grand scheme. Abraham had just finished explaining to God that His promise to make of Abraham a great nation had some serious flaws. “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir” (Genesis 15:2-3 ESV). But God attempted to calm Abraham’s fears by taking him outside and telling him, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5 ESV). God reaffirmed His promise to give Abraham the land and He confirmed it by a covenant in blood. Then God told Abraham, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions” (Genesis 15:13-14 ESV).

Now fast-forward to a scene taking place in the land of Egypt. The descendants of Abraham, through his grandson, Jacob, are living in the land of Egypt. They had sought refuge there when a devastating famine had made the land of Canaan virtually uninhabitable. Because of Joseph’s influence with the Pharaoh, he was able to have land allocated to his brothers and their families and provide them with jobs caring for the herds that belonged to Pharaoh. But eventually, Joseph grew old and realized that he was going to die in the land of Egypt.

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years. And Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph’s own. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear,

saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. – Genesis 50:22-26 ESV

Notice what Joseph said. He told his brothers that they were going to return to the land. He was confident that God was going to accomplish exactly what He had promised to do. They would live in the land of Egypt for 400 years, but then God would redeem them from slavery and return them to their land, "with great possessions." At this point in the story, the people of Israel are not enslaved. They are living in Egypt as the guests of Pharaoh. Their relative, Joseph, is the second-most powerful person in the land. They have land, jobs, house in which to live and no reason to complain about their circumstances. But Joseph knew that things would not always be that way. He knew that God had said they would be afflicted for 400 years. And He believed that they would one day return to the land that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was so confident that he made his brothers swear that they would dig up his bones and take them back to the land with them when they left.

The book of Exodus picks up the story from there. "All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:5-7 ESV). Their number had increased from the original 70 to something that was probably in the millions. And their fruitfulness was going to expose a spirit of ruthlessness in the heart of the new Pharaoh.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. ¹Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves. – Exodus 1:8-14 ESV

God was setting up the perfect scenario to fulfill His plan. He was going to return them to the land. He was going to accomplish His will for them. And Joseph had believed all along that this was going to happen just as God had predicted and promised it would. As the author of Hebrews said, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Joseph had hoped for the day when his people would return to their land, and he was assured that it would happen. He had a strong conviction in the inevitability of it taking place. So much so that he gave instructions to have his bones returned to the land when it happened. And they were. After all the plagues and the killing of the first-borns, when the Egyptians finally released the Israelites, we are told, "Moses took the bones of Joseph with

him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here” (Exodus 13:19 ESV).

Joseph had placed his hope in God, and God had come through. Joseph had believed the promises of God, and God had not disappointed. Joseph had a future-focused faith that refused to give up on God just because his current circumstances seemed to contradict what God had promised. Faith is an assurance in things hoped for and a conviction regarding things yet unseen. God is not done yet. His plan is not yet complete. Give Him time. Give Him the trust he deserves. He has never failed to come through.

When Getting Back Means Letting Go

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. – Hebrews 11:23 ESV

We read it Exodus 1, “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8 ESV). Joseph was gone. Time had passed and the preferential treatment received by his family was about to be a thing of the past. The descendants of Jacob had been fruitful during their peaceful stay in Egypt and their dramatic increase in number got the attention of Pharaoh and raised alarm bells in his mind. What if we go to war and they decide to turn against us and side with our enemies, he reasoned in his mind. Paranoia set in and he determined to turn them into slaves in order to control them. The book of Exodus tells us exactly what happened:

...the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves. – Exodus 1:13-15 ESV

But that wasn't enough for Pharaoh. It was their sheer numbers that worried him, not their military might. After all, they were predominantly shepherds. So, he came up with a plan. He commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children as soon as they came out of the womb. He was going to take care of his perceived problem by infanticide. But fearing God, the Hebrew midwives refused to obey the command of Pharaoh and when he confronted them about their blatant lack of follow through, they said, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them” (Exodus 1:19 ESV). They practiced an early form of civil disobedience and God blessed them for it. So, when Pharaoh's initial plan failed, he came up with another one.

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.” – Exodus 1:22 ESV

This is where our passage for today comes in.

Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’

children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." – Exodus 2:1-10 ESV

The couple involved in this story were Amram and Jochebed. They were just an obscure couple who, like all the other couples living at that time, were struggling with fear and apprehension due to the edict of the Pharaoh that their male children should be sacrificed to the Nile. And I believe it was Pharaoh's intent that each and every Hebrew male child thrown into the Nile was to have been a sacrifice to Hapi, their water and fertility god. The symbols for Hapi were the lotus and papyrus plants. Papyrus was a reed that grew along the banks of the Nile and it was used for everything from paper, rope, furniture and boats. Hapi was believed to be the greatest of the Egyptian gods and was thought to be the maker of the universe and the creator of all things. Each year, at the time of the flooding of the Nile, the people would throw amulets, sacrifices and other offerings into the river to appease Hapi and to ensure a fruitful season of planting and harvest.

In the story, Jochebed makes a small boat made of reeds and places her newborn son in the river in order to protect him from Pharaoh. But rather than seeing her act as a sacrifice to Hapi, she was placing him in the hands of Yahweh, the God of the people of Israel. The author of Hebrews seems to indicate she and her husband somehow knew that there was something special about this child. The *New International Version* translates the phrase as "they saw he was no ordinary child." Luke records in the book of Acts, "At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God's sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father's house" (Acts 7:20 ESV). The word, *beautiful* is the same Greek word used in the Hebrews passage. Somehow God communicated the uniqueness of this child to his parents and they determined to save his life. Jochebed made a reed boat and placed him in the river, trusting in the sovereign will of God to protect him. And God did just that. Luke goes on to record, "and when he was exposed, Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds" (Acts 7:21-22 ESV). When Jochebed set the basket in the river she had no idea what was going to happen. But she had an assurance of things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). She placed her faith in God, and He came through. Somewhat ironically, but not coincidentally, Moses was rescued into Pharaoh's daughter and adopted into the family of the very man who was out to destroy him. God was at work.

Amram and Jochebed did not know what God had planned. They simply knew that their son was somehow unique and special. They placed him in river fully trusting in God to do with him as He saw fit. What they did, they did *by faith*. And like Abraham with Isaac, when these two parents entrusted their son to God, they received him back. Jochebed would be given the unbelievable opportunity to nurse the very son she had placed in the basket, not knowing what

would happen to him. She had been willing to give up that which she loved to Him in whom she believed. And she would live to see her son become more than she could have ever dreamed or imagined. God would use her child to set His people free from their captivity and fulfill the promise He had made to Abraham all those years ago. The very act of placing their son in that reed basket and setting him afloat on the Nile was an act of faith in God. They were trusting in the One whom they could not see to do what they could only hope for – the preservation of the life of their son.

The Promise of God vs the Pleasures of Life

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. – Hebrews 11:24-26 ESV

When Moses' mother, Jochebed, in an attempt to preserve his life, placed him in that basket and set him afloat on the Nile, she had no idea what was going to happen next. Her son was found by the daughter of the Pharaoh, the very man who had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys were to be thrown in the Nile. One of the truly miraculous outcomes of Jochebed's act of faith, was that she would be paid by Pharaoh's daughter to nurse her own child. Moses would grow up at home until the day he was weaned, then he would become a part of Pharaoh's household. In the book of Exodus, Moses records his own life story: "When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, 'Because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water'" (Exodus 2:10 ESV). Moses would receive an Egyptian education. He would be raised to know all about Egyptian culture and would become familiar with their pantheon of gods. He would grow up in the palace and wear fine clothes. But evidently, Moses never forgot his Hebrew heritage. The book of Exodus records, "One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens..." (Exodus 2:11 ESV). His people, the Jews, were slaves and their lot in life was drastically different than that of Moses. While he lived in luxury, they suffered. While he dressed like an Egyptian prince, they wore the tattered clothes of a slave. He enjoyed fine food, while they managed by on a subsistence diet.

Moses was appalled at what he saw, and something within him led him to do something about it. The book of Exodus tells us what happened: "he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exodus 2:11-12 ESV). Moses, enraged by the injustice he witnessed, decided to take matters into his own hands. He sided with the oppressed Hebrew and killed the Egyptian. At that very moment, Moses had made a conscious and somewhat rash decision. The author of Hebrews says Moses "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God" (Hebrews 11:24-25 ESV). It would appear that his action was the result of a premeditated decision to reject his title as "son of Pharaoh's daughter" and associate himself with his own people. He was a Hebrew and he knew it. His people were being oppressed and he was not okay with it. He felt the need to do something about it. But his initial action would get him in trouble. Even though he buried the body, he would be found out. Perhaps the man whose life he spared was afraid that he would be blamed for the death of the Egyptian and so he pointed the finger at Moses. The very next day, Moses found two Hebrews fighting with one another and when he attempted to intervene, they responded, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exodus 2:14 ESV). They did not see Moses as their savior. They didn't even seem to acknowledge him as one of their own. Not only that, but "When Pharaoh heard of it,

he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian” (Exodus 2:15 ESV). Moses had to flee for his life.

Moses had turned his back on the pleasures of life as an Egyptian prince. He chose “rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:25 ESV). But the author of Hebrews adds another interesting point of clarification concerning Moses’ decision. “He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:26 ESV). How did Moses consider the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt when Christ had not yet come? What was the reward for which he was looking? It seems clear that Moses knew of the promises of God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knew about the land of promise. He was fully aware of what God had told his forefather Abraham:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. – Genesis 12:1-3 ESV

Jochebed, his mother, must have shared with him the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He must have known about the story of Joseph and how God had sent him to be a sort of savior for the people of Israel. He had heard the stories of Joseph’s miraculous rise to power. And he must have seen himself as some sort of savior as well, having been placed in his position by God for a purpose. All during his days growing up in Pharaoh’s court, Moses must have remembered the promise that God had given to Abraham:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. – Genesis 17:6-8 ESV

He believed the promises of God. He knew about the land. He knew about the “offspring” to come, who Paul says was to be the Christ.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. – Galatians 3:16 ESV

Moses believed. And he was willing to forego the pleasures of life in Pharaoh’s court in order to be faithful to the promises of God, even if it meant suffering. It is interesting to note that Joseph remained a part of Pharaoh’s court until the day he died. Daniel remained a part of the Babylonian court until the day he died. But Moses was being called by God to reject the fleeting

pleasure of sin and the treasures of Egypt. This was part of God's plan for his life. And he would spend the next 40 years of his life in Midian as a common shepherd, until the day God appeared to him in the burning bush. Moses left his former life behind. He turned his back on his old identity as the son of Pharaoh's daughter in order that he might be who God had called to be, a son of Abraham and the future representative of God as He redeemed His people from their slavery.

Moses had a future-focused faith. His attention was on the hoped for and the unseen. What was promised by God meant more to him than the present pleasures of life. His faith in God would lead to his exile, but also to the exodus. He would find himself a shepherd of sheep and, eventually, the shepherd of God's people.

Waiting on God in Faith

By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. – Hebrews 11:27 ESV

Once again, we have an apparent contradiction between the Exodus account of the life of Moses and that of the author of Hebrews. Exodus tells us that when Moses became aware that news of his murder of the Egyptian had gotten out, he became afraid. “Then Moses was afraid, and thought, ‘Surely the thing is known’” (Exodus 2:14 ESV). Then it goes on to say that when Pharaoh heard about it, “he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian” (Exodus 2:15 ESV). But the Hebrews account says, “By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king.” Which is it? Was Moses afraid or not? Did he flee or not? The author of Hebrews, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit gives us insight into just what was going on. Yes, Moses afraid, but the context tells us that his fear was based on his awareness that news of the murder had spread. His little secret was out. By the time Pharaoh heard about it, Moses had had time to think about it and to reflect on what he should do. According to Hebrews, he had already made plans to go to Midian, not out of fear, but out of faith. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for “flee” can mean “to hasten” or “to put to flight.” The Exodus passage can make it sound like Moses fled for his life out of fear of Pharaoh. But when you combine the two passages, it makes better sense that Moses was put to flight by Pharaoh. We almost immediately think that Moses was fearing for his life. He ran because he was fearful that Pharaoh was going to kill him. But think about what Hebrews 11:24-25 says, “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” Moses had already made the decision to extricate himself from Pharaoh's household. But as the adopted grandson of the Pharaoh, the likelihood that he would be put to death for murder was probably slim to none. What Moses feared was having to go back to his life in the royal palace with its “fleeting pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:25 ESV). Again, we read that Moses left Egypt because, “he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:26 ESV).

So it was “By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king” (Hebrews 11:27a ESV). Moses didn't leave Egypt because of Pharaoh, but because of God. “He kept right on going because he kept his eyes on the one who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:27b NLT). Moses headed to Midian, not out of fear for his life, but out of faith in God. He somehow knew that God was going to fulfill His promise to His people and restore them to the land. He didn't know how yet. He didn't know when. But he believed it was just a matter of time and he was content to go to Midian and persevere until that time came. Little did Moses know that it would be 40 years before God acted. And little did Moses know that when God did decide to act, He would choose to do so through Moses.

The day would come when God deemed it time to redeem His people. Exodus tells us, “During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their

slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exodus 2:23-25 ESV). God knew. And He knew where Moses was. He knew what Moses had been doing. The flight of Moses had been part of God’s plan. Just as Moses had been kept alive in the basket made of bulrushes, Moses had been protected in Midian, removed from the effects of the fleeting pleasures of sin and the treasures of Egypt. During his 40 years in Midian, Moses had given up his quest to be the savior of the people of Israel. He still believed in God’s promise to redeem His people, but he had long ago given up the idea that he might play a role. But God had other plans. He was going to use Moses, but in a way that Moses would find surprising and a bit scary. Hebrews says that Moses “kept his eyes on the one who is invisible.” During his time in Midian, he kept trusting in God. Remember how the author describe faith in verses 1: “Not faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of **things not seen.**” Moses had never seen God and yet he “kept his eyes” on Him. He kept believing in the reality of Him who he could not see and the promises he had yet to see fulfilled. According to Hebrews 11:6, faith is required to please God and whoever would want to draw near to God “must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

It would be safe to say that Moses sought God during his time in Midian, and the day would come when God revealed Himself to Moses.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” – Exodus 3:1-4 ESV

Moses had a direct encounter with the unseen God. He came face to face with Yahweh. And it would be a life-changing moment. Forty years after leaving Egypt, he would be returning, not as the grandson of Pharaoh, but as the representative of God. By faith he had left Egypt and now he was going to be returning the same way – trusting in the promises of God Almighty. To be directed *by* God requires faith *in* God. We must believe that He is at work in our lives in ways that we cannot see or even understand. When Moses left Egypt, he left everything behind. He was forced to begin a new life. But his new circumstances would prove to little more than a temporary pause in the plan of God. God was watching and waiting, preparing to implement His divine redemptive plan at just the right time and using just the right person for the job: Moses.

Faith: Belief in Action

By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. – Hebrews 11:28 ESV

The author of Hebrews skips over a large section of the biography of Moses, going straight from his departure from Egypt after killing another Egyptian to the days just prior to his second departure, this time leading the entire nation of Israel into the wilderness. The account in Hebrews leaves out large, seemingly significant sections of Moses' life, including his call at the burning bush, his somewhat reluctant return to Egypt, his encounters with Pharaoh, and the first nine plagues. From the moment God called Moses in Midian and told him he would be the deliverer of God's people, Moses had to have faith in the word of God. When God had appeared to him at the burning bush in Midian, He had told Moses:

Then the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them." – Exodus 3:7-9 ESV

This would have been good news to Moses. But then he heard the rest of God's plan. "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10 ESV). Moses was reluctant, even resistant, to God's plan. But God told him, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (Exodus 3:12 ESV). God had given Moses a promise, an assurance that he was the one to do the job. God would be with him and God would bring he and the people of Israel back to this very same spot – Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. God went on to tell Moses the rest of His plan.

"But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians." – Exodus 23:19-22 ESV

So, Moses went. And everything went just as God had said. All the way up to the point to which the author of Hebrews refers in verse 28 of chapter 11. There was going to be one last plague that God would bring on the land of Egypt. And while the first nine had been troubling and even devastating at times, the last plague would be deadly. God warned Pharaoh through His servant Moses, "Thus says the Lord: 'About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every

firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle” (Exodus 11:4-5 ESV). While God had protected the people of Israel from most of the other plagues, this one was going to be nation-wide and non-discriminate. All the first-born males throughout the land would die, of both man and animal, including the firstborn of the Jews. Unless they followed God’s directions. On the tenth day of the month, every household was to select a lamb – a one-year old, unblemished male lamb. They were to “keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight” (Exodus 12:6 ESV).

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.” – Exodus 12:7-13 ESV

The people of Israel were instructed to take the blood of their lambs and sprinkle it on the doorposts and lintels of their homes. This final step was essential for their salvation. God had told them, “For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you” (Exodus 12:23 ESV). The blood of the innocent lamb would protect them. But it required faith and obedience. Of all the plagues, this one hit the closest to him – literally. If the people of Israel failed to follow God’s commands, they would suffer the same fate as the Egyptians. Their protection and preservation required faith and action. And Moses led the way. He placed his faith in God and did what God had told him to do. The whole scenario had to have sounded bizarre to Moses. There was no precedent for killing a lamb and sprinkling its blood as a form of protection from death. The sacrificial system had not yet been given. This would have been a costly command, because as shepherds, the people of Israel put a high value on their livestock, especially one that was one-year old and without blemish. A male lamb would have been prime breeding stock. God’s plan probably sounded far-fetched and fairly sketchy to most of the Jews. They most likely had doubts as to whether it would work. You can imagine their fear and dismay as the “destroyer” passed over the city that night and they heard the cries coming from the homes of all those who had lost a firstborn. They would have wondered if the blood would work. But as the dawn came, the thing that saved them was not the quantity or quality of their faith, but the presence of the blood. The Lord looked for the blood. It was the blood that saved them, not their faith. It was God who protected them, not their faith. Their faith was simply an instrument through which they

expressed their trust in God. Moses and the people had to put their faith in God's plan of salvation. And when they did, it worked.

It was Moses' faith in the word of God that ultimately convinced the people of God to sprinkle the blood on their doorposts and lintels. He believed God. His faith was influential and infectious. By faith he obeyed the command of God. By faith he instructed the people of God. His faith in God was instrumental in saving tens of thousands of firstborn Israelites. By faith he kept the Passover *and* sprinkled the blood. His faith showed up in action. He took God at His word and took steps to obey God's word.

The First Step is the Hardest

By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. – Hebrews 11:29 ESV

After God had destroyed the firstborn of Egypt, including the son of Pharaoh, the Egyptians were ready to see the Hebrews leave. “All the Egyptians urged the people of Israel to get out of the land as quickly as possible, for they thought, ‘We will all die!’” (Exodus 12:33 NLT). Not only did they urge them to leave, they loaded them down with wealth just as God had said they would. “And the people of Israel did as Moses had instructed; they asked the Egyptians for clothing and articles of silver and gold. The Lord caused the Egyptians to look favorably on the Israelites, and they gave the Israelites whatever they asked for. So they stripped the Egyptians of their wealth!” (Exodus 12:25-26 NLT). And they marched out, more than a million strong, under the leadership of Moses and the direction of God.

This is where the story gets interesting. “When Pharaoh finally let the people go, **God did not lead them** along the main road that runs through Philistine territory, even though that was the shortest route to the Promised Land” (Exodus 13:17 NLT). Instead, “**God led them** in a roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea” (Exodus 13:18 NLT). God took them the long way. But not only that, He eventually had them do a U-turn. “Then the Lord gave these instructions to Moses: ‘Order the Israelites to turn back and camp by Pi-hahiroth between Migdol and the sea. Camp there along the shore, across from Baal-zephon’” (Exodus 14:1-2 NLT). They were going backwards. God had them head back toward Egypt and He told Moses why. “‘Pharaoh will think, “The Israelites are confused. They are trapped in the wilderness!’ And once again I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after you. I have planned this in order to display my glory through Pharaoh and his whole army. After this the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord!’ So, the Israelites camped there as they were told” (Exodus 14:3-4 NLT). God had one last trick up His sleeve for Pharaoh. He knew that once Pharaoh heard that the Hebrews were camped nearby, he would change his mind and go on the attack. This whole encounter was part of God’s plan.

And Pharaoh didn’t disappoint. He showed up with a huge army complete with 600 chariots and he found the Israelites camped before the Red Sea. “As Pharaoh approached, the people of Israel looked up and panicked when they saw the Egyptians overtaking them. They cried out to the Lord, and they said to Moses, ‘Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness? Weren’t there enough graves for us in Egypt? What have you done to us? Why did you make us leave Egypt? Didn’t we tell you this would happen while we were still in Egypt? We said, “Leave us alone! Let us be slaves to the Egyptians. It’s better to be a slave in Egypt than a corpse in the wilderness!’”” (Exodus 14:10-12 NLT). They were not happy. They were in a full-blown panic. And yet, the author of Hebrews says, “By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land.” They don’t appear to be very faithful in the Exodus account. They don’t seem to have much faith in God. They were scared, disillusioned, and confused. This was not what they had been expecting. Everything had looked so promising and now there were facing the entire army of

Pharaoh. They were in a bad spot. They were in a jam. Their circumstances could not have been any worse. But remember, God had led them there. This was all part of His plan. What looked like the beginnings of an unmitigated disaster was actually going to be a divine deliverance.

Even Moses told the people:

“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” – Exodus 14:13-14 ESV

They had front row seats to what was going to be the greatest show on earth. They just didn’t realize it yet. You know the story. God miraculously parted the Red Sea.

*Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. **And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.** – Exodus 14:21-22 ESV*

There are those who say that they people had no faith. They reason that the faith of which the author of Hebrews speaks is that of Moses. It was his faith that got them across the sea. But the Exodus passage makes it clear that “the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea.” Each and every one of them had to place his or her sandals on ground between those two walls of standing water. They had to take that initial step of faith and walk the path that God had provided. It would have been scary. It would have been intimidating. They would have had doubts along the way, wondering if the walls of water would suddenly crash down, drowning them all. It would have taken a while for more than a million people to make the crossing. The ones in the back of the line must have been wondering if they would ever make it across before Pharaoh’s army arrived. And yet, by faith, the people crossed – each and every one of them. Their salvation, the work of God, required that they step out in obedience. They had to walk if they wanted to live. They had to take the path God had provided, in spite of their fears, doubts and apprehensions.

As we walk on this earth as followers of Christ, we will find ourselves facing difficult and sometimes disillusioning circumstances. God’s path for us will not always be easy or make sense. We will have doubts and fears, second thoughts and last-minute temptations to stop in our tracks and refuse to walk the path God has placed before us. But in those moments, we must remember the words of Moses, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord” (Exodus 14:13 ESV). That doesn’t mean our fear is sin. It simply means that, at some point, we have to stop fearing and start trusting. We have to remember that God is in control and He has a plan for our lives. The path He lays out before us may seem illogical and even dangerous at times. His solution may appear worse than the problem we are facing. But we must learn to trust Him and step out in faith. The people of Israel doubted, but they walked. They feared, but they took the first step. When there had been no way of escape, God had provided one. And they took it – in faith – weak and wavering as it may have been. And they got to the other side.

Walking in Circles of Faith

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. – Hebrews 11:30 ESV

Moses was gone. An entire generation of Israelites had died during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, all because they had refused to believe God and enter the land He had promised them. Their disobedience had brought God's judgment and that generation would never enter the rest that God had promised to provide for them. Now, Joshua led a new generation of Israelites into the promised land. They would not just waltz into the land and take over without a fight. The occupants of the land of Canaan were going to have a real problem with the descendants of Abraham showing up and making claims that the land belonged to them because Yahweh, their God, had given it to them. The land and all its provisions were not going to come without a fight. But God would give Joshua, the new leader, a piece of important news.

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. – Joshua 5:13-15 ESV

This occasion recalls that of Moses at the burning bush. Joshua, like Moses, had a personal and up-close encounter with God Himself in the form of a theophany. Joshua saw what he believed to be a man and this stranger announced himself as the commander of the army of the Lord. That word "commander" can be translated "prince" or "captain." It is believed that this "man" was actually the pre-incarnate Christ. Joshua's immediate reaction reveals his awareness that he was speaking with more than just a man. He fell on his face and worshiped. The very next chapter records the words that the Commander of the army of the Lord shared with Joshua.

Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in. And the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him." – Joshua 6:1-5 ESV

This would have been strange counsel to Joshua. The very first city they encountered was fortified and well-armed, and the Lord was telling Joshua that He would give the city into their hands. But the conditions for achieving this victory were a bit odd. The Lord was explicit in His details. He left nothing to chance or to Joshua's imagination. For six days, they would make a single circuit around the walls of the city. No arrows would be fired. No spears would be thrown. Imagine the reactions they would have gotten from the people behind the walls and the soldiers looking down on this spectacle from the tops of the walls. There would have endured ridicule and countless words of derision. The men of Israel would have struggled with feelings of shame and embarrassment as they marched in a silent column around the city, listening to their enemies question their sanity and manhood. Their swords hung at their side, unused. Their strength was being used up walking instead of fighting. According to the instructions of the Commander of the army of the Lord, "The armed men were walking before the priests who were blowing the trumpets, and the rear guard was walking after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually" (Joshua 6:9 ESV). No one said a word. No one fired a shot. In keeping with the command of Joshua, no one could respond to the jeers and insults coming from behind the well-fortified walls of Jericho. But the people of Israel continued to walk – day after day for six days. But then the seventh day came.

On the seventh day they rose early, at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction." – Joshua 6:15-17 ESV

This day was going to be different. Six days of seemingly pointless activity were going to be followed by an incredible miracle from God. Just as they had the previous six days, the people marched in silence, this time circling the city seven times. And after their final trip around the city "the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:20-21 ESV).

For seven days they had walked and waited. For a solid week they had done as they had been told. They had been faithful and obedient to the Lord's command. That doesn't mean they didn't have doubts. It doesn't mean they didn't question the Lord's plan. There was most likely a fair share of grumbling and grouching around the campfires at night. The people probably wondered if Joshua had really heard from God at all. But they walked. For seven days they did as they had been told. Their walking was evidence that they were trusting God. They didn't know exactly how the walls were going to fall. God had not explained how He would do it. But they knew the part they were called to play. They were to march. They were to obey. And they were to wait on the Lord. Their pride had to take a back seat. Their physical abilities had to be used walking and not fighting. But as the author of Hebrews tells us, "by faith the walls of Jericho fell down." It wasn't their faith that caused the walls to fall. It was God. But their faith

was instrumental in God's power being unleashed and put on display. Had they stopped walking the walls would not have fallen. Had they decided to take up their swords and attack the city in their own strength, the outcome would have been radically different. Their faith was in God. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). They hoped for victory, and they were convinced it would happen – not because they marched, but because their God had promised it. Their marching was simply an expression of their faith in God. Sometimes trusting God requires us to step out – in faith – and walking in seemingly meaningless circles. But if we truly trust God, walking and waiting is well worth it. He always comes through – in His way and according to His will.

Unwavering Faith From An Unlikely Source

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. – Hebrews 11:31 ESV

Now things get really interesting. Up to this point in the chapter, the author of Hebrews has been dealing with some fairly significant and well-known individuals in the family tree of Israel – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, and by extension, Joshua. But it should catch us a bit by surprise to read the name of a prostitute in this great “Hall of Faith.” To understand her presence in the list of the faithful provided in Hebrews 11, we have to go back to the original story found in the book of Joshua. When it came time for the people of Israel to begin their God-ordained occupation of the land of Canaan, Joshua sent out spies to determine the situation in Jericho. “And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho.’ And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there” (Joshua 2:1 ESV). There is a lot we don’t know in this story. We don’t know why they chose Rahab’s house. Had they been given her name by someone else? Were they aware that she was a follower of Yahweh? Did they choose a prostitute’s house because they believed no one would think to look for them there? The passage doesn’t provide us with answers to these questions. But we do know that someone ratted on the two spies, and the king of Jericho sent soldiers to Rahab’s house to find them.

Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.” – Joshua 2:3 ESV

But rather than turn the two spies over to the king's soldiers, she hid them, and she covered for them.

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, “True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.” – Joshua 2:4-5 ESV

Rahab protected the two Israelite spies. Why? Because she was a God-fearer. She had somehow heard about the God of Israel and believed in Him. Word of God’s powerful and miraculous deliverance of Israel from captivity in Egypt had gotten out, and Rahab determined that He was the one true God. She knew that Jericho was no match for God, so she protected the spies and asked them to return the favor when the time came.

Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, “I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and

Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.” – Joshua 2:9-13 ESV

I tend to believe that the two men inadvertently ended up at Rahab's house and that they had no idea she was a believer in Yahweh. That would have been the last thing they expected from a woman who made her living as a prostitute in a pagan city. But God, in His divine plan, arranged for them to go to the very house where they would find a woman who had become a believer in the God of Israel. She was so convinced of God's power that she knew Jericho was going to fall. She only asked that she and her family be spared. She believed with all her heart that the God of Israel was the "God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." The spies made an agreement with Rahab, instructing her to tie a scarlet thread in her window. That would act as a sign, much like the blood on the door post and lintels during the Passover. That threat would tell the Israelite troops to spare all the individuals found in that house. And when the walls of Jericho fell, we are told, "But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho" (Joshua 6:25 ESV).

You might be tempted to say that Rahab's faith was in the two spies. She believed they would keep their word and spare her life. But while there is some truth to that, the thing that drove her actions from the outset was her belief that God was the one true God and that He would give their city into the hands of the Israelite troops. Their God was greater. And in her action of providing protection for the two spies, she was acknowledging that she believed in God. Hebrews 11:6 tells us "without faith it is impossible to please him [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Rahab definitely believed God existed. And she was seeking His protection and the reward of her life being spared. Rahab had no track record with God. She had simply heard the stories of His deliverance of the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. She had heard about His redemptive power illustrated in the parting of the Red Sea. She had heard the stories about His defeat of the Amorites. For her, the rumors and hearsay became cause for belief. And her faith that God was real and that He had the power to save as well as destroy would lead to life, rather than death. Everyone in the city was doomed to destruction, but her faith in God resulted in her salvation.

Rahab would go on to spend the rest of her life living among the God's people. She would marry and have children. In fact, you read her name in the gospel of Matthew. She is listed in the lineage of David.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the

*father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and **Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. – Matthew 1:2-6 ESV*

And from David would come the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Not only did Rahab's faith result in the sparing of her own life, it paved the way for the coming of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Her faith had long-lasting repercussions. Out of faith in God, she gave a friendly welcome to the spies, and that faith would result in her redemption and allow for the coming of the Redeemer of the world.

The Many Faces of Faith

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 — 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. Women received back their dead by resurrection. 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, mistreated — of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. — Hebrews 11:32-38 ESV

The list goes on. The author of Hebrews draws this chapter to a close but can't help but add a few more names to his growing list of the faithful. He mentions Gideon, who lived in Israel during a time of spiritual apathy and moral depravity. God had given the Israelites over to the hands of the Midianites as punishment. "For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey" (Judges 6:3-4 ESV). But when the people cried out to God, He sent them Gideon as a judge to deliver them. But Gideon was a reluctant deliverer. When God called him, his response was less than enthusiastic. "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (Judges 6:15 ESV). And God's response to him was simple and direct: "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man" (Judges 6:16 ESV). Gideon would go on to accomplish great things for God, delivering His people from the oppression of the Midianites — by faith. Each step of the way, Gideon had to believe God's promise that He would be with him.

This is true of each of the individuals listed in the verses above. Barak had to face the overwhelmingly superior armies of Sisera on the words of Deborah, a prophetess. The odds were against him, but He obeyed the word of the Lord and God gave Israel a great victory.

Then there was Samson, a somewhat surprising addition to the list. His story is a sad one and does not end well. He was driven by his desires and eventually defeated by them. But on the final day of his life, having been blinded by the Philistines and chained between two pillars, he called out to God in faith. "O Lord God, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judges 16:28 ESV). That prayer of faith, lifted up in his most vulnerable, weak condition, was answered by God. "Then he bowed with all his strength, and the house fell upon the lords and upon all the people who were in it. So, the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life" (Judges 16:30 ESV). He died in faith, trusting in His God and giving his last minutes of life to destroy the enemies of God.

What about Jephthah? He had been born as a result of his father's immoral affair with a prostitute, and when he became an adult, Jephthah was thrown out of the family by his brothers. He ended up living in a form of exile from his family and found himself in the companionship of "worthless men." But when the Ammonites began to oppress the Israelites, they sought out Jephthah to deliver them because he was a mighty warrior. In his newfound position as the judge of Israel, Jephthah turned to the Lord, and he made a vow to God.

"If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." – Judges 11:30-31 ESV

Jephthah believed that God could and would deliver His people. But he wrongly assumed that God would want something in return, so he bargained with God. I suggest that Jephthah fully believed that God would come through and that he would be required to follow through on his vow. But little did he know that after God had given him the victory over the Ammonites, it would be his own daughter who came out of the house to greet him. He would go on to sacrifice his daughter. This is a bizarre and disturbing story. It seems a bit strange to include this man in the Hall of Faith. But while Jephthah's understanding of God was somewhat flawed, he did believe in the power and deliverance of God. He trusted that God would and would come through. His problem was that his faith in God was marred by a faulty understanding of God.

In the case of David, the stories that exemplify his faith in God are many. The psalms he wrote echo his belief in God and his unwavering faith that God was his savior and sustainer. From the moment David was anointed the next king of Israel, he had to live a life of faith in God, spending years trusting in the promise of God while running for his life from the wrath of King Saul. He had been anointed king by God, but Saul was still on the throne. David learned to wait on God, believe in God, trust in God, and rely on God. And his life reflects that faith.

From his earliest days as a young boy serving in the house of the Lord under the watchful eye of Eli the priest, Samuel developed a growing faith in God. He would become a prophet for God, speaking on his behalf and leading the people of Israel to obey the will and word of God. Samuel would eventually be called on by God to anoint Israel's first king. And while he was reluctant to do so, he obeyed. Throughout his life, Samuel would learn to trust God. He had to believe that God knew what He was going, even when it seemed to make no sense. His faith is best seen in his faithful obedience to the will of God. What God said, he would do. Whatever God declared, he would believe. Trusting that God knows what He is doing even when you can't comprehend it or completely appreciate it is a hallmark of faith.

The author of Hebrews goes on to illustrate that faith is oftentimes accompanied by rousing success, including military victories, strength in the midst of weakness, deliverance by the hand of God, and mind-blowing miracles. But just as often faith can be accompanied by less-than-ideal circumstances. He mentions torture, mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment, stoning, destitution and even death. Faith doesn't always result in a happy ending. Samson died under the very rubble that destroyed the Philistines. David died never getting to build the temple he

dreamed of constructing for God. Jephthah would see the accolades for the victory over the Ammonites go to a woman. The focus of our faith should always be God. Faith is trusting Him regardless of what we see happening or not happening around us. The presence of difficult does not mean the absence of God. The lack of answer is not proof of God's lack of power or interest. Faith that is God-focused is willing to wait and comfortable accepting seemingly unacceptable outcomes knowing that God is not done yet.

Something Better

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

– Hebrews 11:39-40 ESV

Let's go back through the list again. Abel died at the hands of his brother. Enoch was taken by God in the prime of life. Noah lived to see the sin that plagued mankind before the flood raise its ugly head again and infect his own family. Abraham would never occupy the land God had promised to give him, and he would die long before his offspring would grow to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Sarah would bear a son in spite of her old age and barrenness but would die without ever giving birth again. Isaac would watch his sons, Jacob and Esau, spend years of their lives separated from and loathing one another. Jacob would die in the land of Egypt, the patriarch of a family no more than 70 in number. Moses would lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land, but never step foot into it himself because of his anger against God. The people of Israel would make it into the land but would fail to obey God's commands and eventually end up being removed by God and forced to live in exile in Babylon. For Rahab, other than her mention in the lineage of Jesus, she passed on into obscurity, living among the people of Israel.

Their life stories, while marked by faith, are not all pictures of the good life. Their lives were not trouble-free or devoid of difficulty and doubt. They are recognized for their faith, but the author makes it clear that many who live lives of faith also experience their fair share of trials and troubles. He describes those who were tortured for their faith, "refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life" (Hebrews 11:35 ESV).

They would not recant their faith in God even under torture. Instead, they trusted that, should they die, God would raise them again to eternal life. The author speaks of women who "received back their dead by resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35 ESV). I don't think this means that the dead were raised back to life, but that these women had faith that they would see their lost ones again in heaven. They were willing to suffer loss in this life because of their faith in the life to come.

What is amazing is that the author makes it clear that many in his list "did not receive what was promised" (Hebrews 11:39 ESV). Because the promise was future-oriented. The fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham was ultimately fulfilled in Christ. His death and resurrection opened up the gospel to all people. No longer would the Jews be the sole beneficiaries of God's blessings. Today, people from every tribe, nation and tongue have placed their faith in Jesus Christ and have become part of the family of Abraham. The book of Revelation tells us of a scene that will take place in the future where all the offspring of Abraham, both Jew and Gentile, will gather before the throne of God.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and

before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" – Revelation 7:9-10 ESV

Abraham longed to see that day and died believing that it would come. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Each of the individuals in the list found in Hebrews 11 received something better. Because of their faith in the promise of God, they received entrance into the presence of God. Ultimately their faith was in the hope of God's redemption. None of them lived long enough to see the coming of Jesus into the world. Yet, they lived their lives longing for a Messiah, a deliverer from the sin that surrounded them. Paul tells us, "But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Galatians 3:22 ESV).

This includes those who lived before the coming of Christ. Their belief in the promises and power of God were seen by God as faith in the coming Messiah. They were willing to trust God with their present circumstances, knowing that He had a future solution in mind.

Their faith was in God. They trusted Him for things they could not see. They hoped because they had an assurance that He could deliver what He had promised. They endured because they believed He would come through. Ultimately, all the promises of God were fulfilled in Christ. He was and is mankind's hope. And while they may not have fully realized it, every one of the people in the Hall of Faith were placing their faith in Christ, God's redeemer, deliverer, savior, sacrifice, and key to experiencing all the blessings God has in store. Abraham lived in tents all of his life, but we're told "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10 ESV).

He knew that God had something better in store for him and he died believing that. The author of Hebrews tells us that these individuals "all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar" (Hebrews 11:13 ESV). They knew something better was in store for them, so they were willing to live as "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13 ESV). They desired "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16 ESV). They put their faith in God and their hope in something they could not see. "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:16 ESV).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. – Revelation 21:1-7 ESV