

Living Between the Best and Worst of Times

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[0 : 0 0] We are going to start with Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 32 and down through verse number 38. And what more shall I say?

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Derek, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 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.

Father, thank you for your goodness to us. Thank you for the grace that you have shown us in sending our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We plead the blood of Jesus again as our only hope, our only righteousness, our only hope of salvation, our only way to eternal life.

[1 : 3 7] Thank you for your great kindness to us. Please help us as we continue in this time of learning and growing together in your word. Help us to believe and to obey the things that we find here.

In Jesus' name, amen. Sleeping soundly is the best, isn't it? Warm bed, comfortable pillow, dark, quiet room, sweet dreams.

Some of you are already beginning to get a little drowsy. What about waking up from a deep sleep? That's less fun, isn't it?

It doesn't matter if you are awakened by your alarm clock, or a child, or your pet, or a rooster, or a thunderstorm, or a nightmare. Waking up unexpectedly, especially from deep sleep, is among the worst of all experiences.

I remember an occasion where I awoke from deep sleep. It was not by a noise. It was not by someone, you know, sort of shaking me.

[2 : 5 2] I just woke up. And as I was lying there, when my eyes opened, the first thing that I saw, really the only thing I saw, was six to seven-year-old Chloe standing right next to the bed, staring at me like those creepy twins from the movie The Shining.

Do you know the ones I'm talking about? That's what it looked like. Now, in the music, sorry, in the musical, The Sound of Music, Maria teaches the Von Trapp children a song.

And she teaches them this song because they have been awakened from deep sleep by a thunderstorm. I wonder if you remember this song. It goes like this. Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens.

Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens. Brown paper packages tied up with strings. These are a few of my favorite things.

Cream-colored ponies and crisp apple strudels. Doorbells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles. Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings.

[4 : 09] These are a few of my favorite things. Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes. Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes.

Silver white winters that melt into springs. These are a few of my favorite things. When the dog bites.

When the bee stings. When I'm feeling sad. I simply remember my favorite things.

And then I don't feel so bad. I need to know. Does that work for you? Because this has not been my experience.

Remembering my favorite things. Thinking happy thoughts does not make me feel less bad. And I suspect this was also not the experience of the first hearers of the book of Hebrews.

[5 : 21] These first readers are predominantly Jewish converts to Christianity. And following Jesus is very costly to them. And they are experiencing adversity and persecution.

Even death for their faith. And as a result, they are a community in deliberation. Is following Jesus really worth it? I am so glad that the author of Hebrews doesn't say, You just need to remember your favorite things.

And then you won't feel so bad. No. Instead, he points them to a long line of God followers.

Those whose faith was evidenced by their action. And having walked them through this hall of faith, The author now begins drawing this final portion of this scripture to a close.

Look at verse number 32. And what more can I say? Time is too short for me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, Who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, Shut the mouths of lions, Shut the mouths of lions, Quenched the raging of fire, Escaped the edge of the sword, Gained strength in weakness, Became mighty in battle, And put foreign armies to flight.

[7 : 11] That's quite a list, isn't it? Now, I don't want to belabor this, Because the author of Hebrews does not belabor this, But let's make two brief observations about this final trophy case in the hall of faith.

First, faith shines brightest in spiritual darkness. I find it intriguing that four of the last six names that are mentioned are from the book of Judges.

And if you know anything about the book of Judges, You probably remember that it's dark. Spiritually dark. Judges is the record of one of the most spiritually bleak times in the entire history of God's people.

And yet, from this dark period, The author of Hebrews mentions Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. I think this ought to encourage readers of Hebrews to keep on believing.

Even when believing in Jesus seems rare, And being like Jesus is in the minority position.

[8 : 27] Faith shines brightest in spiritual darkness. Second observation. The faithful are also sinful. Now, some of these characters are more sinful than others, of course, But none are what we would call picture-perfect examples.

Not even close. Samson was impulsive and driven by his lusts again and again in the story of Samson. And David inexcusably used his strength to exploit Bathsheba's weakness, And then tried to cover up his abuse by deceiving and ultimately murdering her husband.

The faithful are also sinful. But remarkably, and this should encourage us, They are not remembered for their sin, weakness, and failure.

They are remembered for their faith. And perseverance requires grace.

- Grace, not perfection. I am not perfect. Maybe you are. I don't know. But I am not perfect.
- [9 : 55] But if you're not perfect like me, Then we can revel in this last list of names. And we can cling to God's mercy. And plead the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness that we need.
- And seek God's grace of repentance. Because perseverance requires grace. Not perfection. Faith, then, conquers kingdoms.
- And faith administers justice. And faith obtains promises. And faith shuts lions' mouths. And faith quenches raging fire.
- And faith escapes the edge of the sword. Faith strengthens weakness. Faith increases might in battle. What an amazing summary of God working through faith.
- These stories. They are some of our favorite things, aren't they? If only every day of faith could be like this highlight reel.
- [11 : 03] You know? But what about when the dog bites? And what about when the bee stings?
- And what about when I'm feeling sad? Verse 35. Women.
- Received their dead. Raised. To life again. Now, when we read this initially, this sounds like it ought to be included in the first portion that I read.
- This is amazing. Women received back their dead. To life again. But there's an implication here that we don't want to miss.
- Do you know what an implication is, Owen? I'm going to teach you this morning what an implication is. If I say to you, my feet are soaking wet.
- [12 : 09] What would the implication of that statement be? Either I've got really sweaty feet, right, Elam? That's what you're thinking, right?
- I've got really sweaty feet. Or I stepped in a puddle. Or maybe I wore my shoes into the lake. That would be the implication. When I say, my feet are soaking wet, there's something else that's behind that.
- If your mom or your dad says to you, there is toothpaste all over the bathroom mirror, what would the implication be? Someone was brushing their teeth and got a little carried away, right?
- When we read this, that women received back their dead, raised to life, what is the implication? Someone died.
- That's a sharp contrast to escaping the edge of the sword, isn't it? So this phrase about women receiving back their dead, raised to life, serves as a bridge between the first portion, this highlight reel of faith, and what is to come.
- [13 : 35] And we see it through that implication. In order for there to have been a resurrection, there must have also been an associated death. Middle of verse 35.
- Other people were tortured. Not accepting release. So that they might gain a better resurrection.
- Should we practice? What is the implication here? They were tortured to what? To death. Because they were tortured and refused to recant.
- They refused to compromise. They refused to give up what God says is true. They refused to say, Caesar is Lord. They refused to bow the knee.
- And as a result, not only were they tortured, but they were tortured not accepting release. They could have been released. That's the implication.
- [14 : 42] But instead, they chose to die for their faith so that they might have a better resurrection. Verse 36.

Others experienced mockings and scourgings as well as bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They died by the sword.

They wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them.

They wandered in deserts and on mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. The world will ridicule and persecute and oppress those who walk by faith.

This is the way of the world ever since the Garden of Eden. The world will reject God's people and yet, ironically, the world is unworthy of God's people.

[16 : 00] Do you see that irony? Those who walk by faith will rarely be included in the list of the world's VIPs. And yet, by faith in Jesus, God's approval is infinitely more valuable than the world's acceptance.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that God's approval in Jesus is infinitely more valuable than the world's acceptance?

I can't help but notice how this text corrects a presupposition about faith. In other words, something that we carry into this text that we expect a certain outcome.

Let me see if I can help you with that. This text corrects a presupposition. Here's my hunch. Many of us, including myself, will drift towards a prosperity gospel way of thinking about faith.

faith. Do you know why the prosperity gospel is popular and prevalent? Because it focuses on the first half of our text.

[17 : 32] That's where it lives. In the first half of our text. Conquering kingdoms, shutting lions' mouths, and so on.

That's why it's popular. popular. And the reason why the prosperity gospel is a false gospel is because it ignores the second half of our text.

If you are not experiencing verses 33 and 34 and so on, then, according to the prosperity gospel way of thinking, your faith must be deficient or at least insufficient.

And if you are experiencing the second half of this list, again, the answer is something must be wrong with your faith.

But notice how this text corrects that presupposition. This long line of faithful men and women that the author of Hebrews has gone to great pains to bring before us, they experienced both.

[18 : 46] you can see that there in the verse 34. Perhaps they escaped the edge of the sword or perhaps they died by the sword in verse 37.

Now, I'm guessing that you have never conquered a kingdom. I mean, unless if you're playing a video game or something like that. But I'm just going to go out of limb and say that none of us have conquered a kingdom.

But I also suspect that none of us have ever found ourselves hiding in a hole in the ground because of our faith.

death. So then, what do we do with these extremes? How do we make sense of these extreme things that we read about in this text?

Do you like to dive off the diving board when you go to the pool? Diving board? Are we diving board people? A little bit. It's fun, right? I learned something this week.

[20 : 01] I had to look it up. I had a hunch this was true, but I had to look it up. Do you know how scoring works in diving? I didn't either. I had a hunch, but I had to look it up.

There are seven judges who score each dive. And do you know what the computer does after all seven judges put in their scores for the dive? The computer says the biggest two don't count and the smallest two don't count.

So there's seven, and now you'll see if you're watching this during the Olympics on TV, because that's the only time we watch diving. If you're watching this on TV, you'll see four of the scores are crossed off.

That's the two highest and the two smallest scores. Then the remaining three scores are totaled up and then multiplied by the degree of difficulty, and that becomes your score for the dive.

Why do I bother to mention this? Why do they do this? Well, this way, a single judge cannot have a bias for or against one of the divers.

[21 : 08] And this way, you can have judges from a variety of countries, and judges can also judge their own countries, because if you happen to give the high score, it won't matter.

It just gets thrown out anyway. In most cases, we are not experiencing either the very highs of conquering kingdoms or the very lows of hiding in a hole in the ground.

It would be tempting to say, well, then maybe my faith isn't genuine at all. But I think that exactly misses the point. Perseverance in faith.

Perseverance means faithfulness on the best days, the worst days, and every day in between. So let me ask you this.

Where do you find yourself today? Where do you find yourself today? By the by, this is a great question to ask yourself at the end of the day, to ask someone near you who you love and are having a conversation over a meal with.

[22 : 29] This could make for a really great dinner time conversation. Where do you find yourself today? today? I suspect that you are somewhere between conquering a kingdom and hiding in a hole in the ground.

Is that fair? We are somewhere between those extremes. We have some good days, we have some bad days, but most days fall somewhere in the in between.

I love how the author of Hebrews sets this community in deliberation up for this truth, that perseverance leans hard into community.

Here's what I mean that he sets them up for this. Look in your Bible at chapter 10 and verse 22. This is just before the hall of faith. Hebrews 10 verse 22.

Notice how he sets them up for this idea of community. Let us draw near with true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed in pure water.

[23 : 47] Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other and all the more as you see the day approaching.

Do you see how he sets them up for this idea that perseverance, perseverance leans hard into community?

If you hope to persevere in your faith as a follower of Jesus, you are going to do that among and alongside and with other faithful followers of Jesus.

no lone rangers. Brothers and sisters, this means we need commitment to one another.

Commitment to one another. More than answers for life's highs and lows. Man, it's easy to want to give an answer to all of the lows, isn't it? More than answers.

[25 : 07] We need one another's loving presence and enduring commitment. Perseverance means sitting together and telling the truth about pain and grief and loss and injustice and then pointing one another to the power of our crucified and risen Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Suffering is very real. It was real then and it is real now and that suffering may last for a very, very long time.

The absence of relief from suffering may be an unchangeable fact, but the greatest truth we need to hear from one another is that we are held in Christ by God.

Wherever you find yourself today, know this, God will not leave you or forsake you. and we model the love of Jesus when we sit with one another and we ask, what is God doing today?

Where do you find yourself today? And what is God doing in it? Is it a great day? Was it an awful day?

[26 : 34] Was it a day like so many others that fall in the in-between? pain? We each have our own best days.

We each have our own worst days. And in the best days, we learn to share and celebrate. And on the worst days, it's important for us to remember that we are each going to deal with suffering uniquely.

Some of us will suffer in silence. That's hard. we will suffer in silence. We need brothers and sisters to speak God's truth to us, to ask us, where do you find yourself today?

Some of us won't suffer in silence. Some of us are going to have little fits of rage. Understandable. There are many things in the world that make us rightly angry, aren't there?

Some of us are going to appear very stoic. like they've got it all together. Like nothing is ever going to fluster them. Some of us will feel shame.

[27 : 45] Some of us will be tempted to pull away. Even from our brothers and sisters. Why? Because we have been deeply hurt by those who said they would help.

We're all going to deal with our high days and low days differently. Persevering together means walking through every one of those days even if the person never gets over it.

It's important for us together to acknowledge that troubles of all sorts are very real and life is often very hard and we remind each other that God's grace is sufficient and God is faithful to finish what he started.

We model Jesus' love by showing empathy, genuine compassion, tenderheartedness. I remember my favorite things and then I don't feel so bad.

Oh no. That is never going to be sufficient. Brothers and sisters, let me stir your confidence in Jesus. Jesus took a body and he entered into the realities of our weakness.

[29 : 16] This was not to ensure that every day was your best day. Don't believe the lie. Jesus did not enter into your weakness so that every day right now could be your best day.

Jesus did not enter in your weakness primarily so that he could better understand what it was like to endure suffering although he is our faithful high priest.

Christ. Jesus took a body so that he could live and so that he could die so that by his death he could destroy the one who has the power of death.

That is the devil and all of his works and that's good news for us. It's good news for us because Jesus has defeated our suffering once and for all through his death on the cross and through his glorious resurrection from the dead.

A better resurrection. A resurrection never to die again. A resurrection that even if this life costs you your life and you find yourself on a very bad day, you have this hope of a better resurrection with Jesus.

[30 : 48] A resurrection never to die again. I wonder if Jesus is your savior. And if Jesus is not your savior, what in the world are you waiting for?

You know what life is like. Good days, bad days, and so many days in between. What kind of a day are you waiting for?

Trust in Jesus today. Claim Jesus' promise for yourself today. Call upon the name of the Lord Jesus today.

Paul concludes, the wonderful portion of faith that we call Romans 8. I don't suspect that Paul called it that, but that's what we call it, Romans 8.

And he writes words that sound a bit like our text in Hebrews chapter 11. See if you can pick up on some similarities here. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword.

[32 : 20] Do you see a few dotted lines back to our text in Hebrews 11? As it is written, Paul says, for your sake, we are being killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. This is what it's going to feel like some days. Like sheep heading to the slaughter.

Our present suffering is very real and so we commit to one another. We bear witness with one another and we give one another confidence through the promises of God.

Our present sufferings are very real, but they are not the whole story. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered?

No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors. More than conquerors through him who loved us.

[33 : 34] For I am sure, certain, confident that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord, when the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I am feeling sad, I choose to remember my God still loves me, and then, then I don't feel so bad.

should we pray about that together? Let's pray. Father, as we quiet our hearts before you, would you please send your Holy Spirit to minister to us?

However we answer this question, where do you find yourself today? Holy Spirit, as we are quiet for a few moments, as we answer this question honestly, in our hearts, would you please minister to us as only you can?

Father, some of us find ourselves troubled, and stirred up and anxious and insecure.

[35 : 56] Some of us find ourselves questioning whether these things can really be true, and we are just not sure. some of us are feeling deep grief, loss, pain.

Some of us are hurting because of some physical ailment, and maybe nobody else knows. some of us, in all likelihood, are feeling some measure of guilt, and some of us are feeling shame.

Some of us find ourselves today feeling lonely. Some of us have broken hearts. some of us, Father, are celebrating your kindness and your grace and your goodness, and we are recalling the sweetness of your kindness to us in Jesus.

Jesus. We find ourselves somewhere on this continuum every day. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for ministering sufficient grace to us.

Some of us need comfort. Some of us need encouragement. Some of us need solace. Some of us need solitude. Some of us need forgiveness.

[37 : 39] this. Some of us need to be saved. Thank you for working in our hearts and meeting us wherever we are today and every day.

Would you please help us to help one another? Stir our hearts with these let us statements that we looked at in chapter 10.

Stir our hearts hearts that we might be the kind of people unwilling to leave a brother or a sister behind. Give us courage to sit for as long as it takes to be present with one another, to bear witness to your promises without always being so inclined to offer quick fixes and suggestions and ideas and remedies to get over it.

Stir our hearts with confidence in our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and not in ourselves. Father, we ask these things because we believe that our persevering in faith is for your glory and for our good.

God, so please help us to lean hard into community and to recall your good promises to us.

[39 : 12] We are not overcome, and it is because of your great love. Good Father, we ask and pray these things in the name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.