

11 The Faith That Conquers and the Faith That Suffers

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Last week I wrote about choosing joy in the middle of the storm. About standing back up every time the bully of despair knocks you down. About clenching your teeth, facing the pain, and saying: "This will not defeat me. I choose joy."

And I meant every word.

But this week, I need to talk about something harder.

Because sometimes, the bully wins - at least in the earthly sense.

Sometimes you choose joy, and you still lose the battle. Sometimes you have faith, and the miracle doesn't come. Sometimes you knock and knock and knock, and the door stays closed until heaven. Peter stepped out in faith – got out of the boat in the midst of a raging storm – but allowed the circumstances around him to pull his eyes away from Jesus.

And we don't talk about that enough.

We love the first half of Hebrews 11 - the Hall of Faith - where heroes conquer kingdoms and shut the mouths of lions. We quote those verses when we need encouragement. We preach sermons about faith that moves mountains and defeats enemies.

But we conveniently stop reading halfway through.

Because the second half of Hebrews 11 doesn't end with victory.

It ends with... Suffering. Torture. Even death.

And both halves - conquest AND suffering - are equally identified as faith.

The Two Sides of Faith (Hebrews 11:33-40)

Let's read the whole passage.

"Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, received promises, shut the mouths of lions, put out raging fires, escaped death by the sword, found strength in weakness, became powerful in battle, and routed foreign armies. Women received their dead raised back to life." (Hebrews 11:33-35a)

That's the faith we tend to celebrate.

Kingdoms conquered. Justice administered. Promises received. Lions silenced. Fires extinguished. Swords escaped. Strength in weakness. Power in battle. Dead raised to life.

That's the faith we want.

The faith that gets the miracle. The faith that parts the Red Sea. The faith that brings down Jericho's walls. The faith that raises Lazarus.

But then the passage keeps going:

"Other people were brutally tortured, but refused to be ransomed, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Still others endured taunts and floggings, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, sawed in half, and killed with swords. They went around in sheepskins and goatskins. They were needy, oppressed, and mistreated. The world wasn't worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and from caves to holes in the ground." (Hebrews 11:35b-38)

Wait. What?

Brutally tortured. Taunted. Flogged. Chained. Imprisoned. Stoned to death. Sawed in half. Killed with swords. Needy. Oppressed. Mistreated. Wandering in deserts and caves.

That's also faith?

Yes.

That's also faith.

And here's what moves me about this passage:

"All these people won approval for their faith but they did not receive what was promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that they would not be perfected without us." (Hebrews 11:39-40)

They won approval for their faith.

Both groups.

The ones who conquered kingdoms AND the ones who were tortured.

The ones who shut the mouths of lions AND the ones who were stoned to death.

The ones who escaped the sword AND the ones who died by the sword.

All approved. All honored. All commended for their faith.

Even though half of them didn't receive what was promised on this side of heaven.

When Faith Doesn't Look Like Victory

We have a problem in modern Christianity.

We've been sold a version of faith that only looks like the first half of Hebrews 11.

Faith means you conquer. Faith means you overcome. Faith means you get the healing, the breakthrough, the miracle, the victory.

And if you don't?

Well, maybe you didn't have enough faith. Maybe you had unconfessed sin. Maybe you didn't pray hard enough or believe strong enough or claim the promise boldly enough.

But Hebrews 11 destroys that theology.

Because it puts conquest and suffering side by side and says: **Both are faith.**

Daniel had faith, and God shut the lions' mouths.

But others had faith, and they were sawed in half.

The three Hebrew boys had faith, and God delivered them from the fiery furnace.

But others had faith, and they were burned at the stake.

Peter had faith, and an angel led him out of prison.

But James had faith, and Herod killed him with the sword.

Lazarus had faith (well, his sisters did), and Jesus raised him from the dead.

But Stephen had faith, and they stoned him while he was praying for them.

Same faith. Different outcomes.

And all approved.

The Castle in the Storm (Again)

In my book *Do You Live in a Castle?* I talk about how we build walls to protect ourselves from pain. And in Chapter 11 - The Assault - I talk about what happens when life attacks anyway.

Cancer. Death. Loss. Betrayal. The unexpected disasters that don't care how high your walls are.

When the assault comes, you have a choice: fortify the fortress, or run to the Rock.

But here's what I didn't fully explore in that chapter: **sometimes you run to the Rock, and the assault still wins... or at least feels like it does.**

Sometimes you trust God completely, and your loved one still dies.

Sometimes you surrender everything, and the cancer still spreads.

Sometimes you lower the drawbridge, invite God in, abide in the vine, do everything "right" - and you still end up in the second half of Hebrews 11.

Tortured. Persecuted. Wandering. Needing. Suffering.

Does that mean your faith failed?

No.

It means your faith looked like the second half instead of the first half.
And both are approved.

My Own Story (The Second Half Kind)

My father had prostate cancer.

We prayed. He went into remission. We believed God had said "yes."

Then the cancer came back. Terminal.

We prayed again. Harder. More people. More faith.

And God said no.

Not "no, I don't love you." Not "no, I'm not listening." Just: "No. Not this way. Not this time. His healing is coming - but not on earth."

My dad died at 72, praising God and encouraging us in our faith.

He had faith. Real faith. The kind that shuts the mouths of lions.

But his outcome looked like the second half of Hebrews 11.

He didn't receive what we hoped for - healing on this side of heaven.

Was his faith lacking? Was ours?

No.

God just had "something better" planned.

My niece Jennifer battled neuroblastoma. A little girl with more faith than most adults I know. Her father (my brother) would play the guitar and sing worship songs, she would sing along praising Jesus.

She didn't get her earthly healing either.

Was her faith insufficient? Was my brother's?

No.

She just got the "better resurrection" that Hebrews 11:35 talks about.

My wife has lupus. My daughter has autoimmune issues. I battle chronic migraines.

We pray. We have faith. We trust God.

And we're still in the second half of Hebrews 11.

Still wandering in the wilderness of chronic illness. Still needy. Still waiting for the promise.

Does that mean we lack faith?

No.

It means our faith doesn't look like conquest yet.

It looks like endurance.

The Tower, The Walls, The Vine

The Tower is where we retreat when suffering comes. We watch life from a distance, isolated, convinced that if we just stay high enough above it all, we won't get hurt again.

But faith - even suffering faith - doesn't hide in the tower.

It stays engaged. It keeps trusting. Even when the view from the tower shows nothing but more pain ahead.

The Walls are what we build to protect ourselves from the next assault. "Never again," we say. "I won't let myself be vulnerable to this kind of pain again."

But faith - even suffering faith - doesn't build higher walls.

It trusts that God is the wall. That He's the fortress. That even if He doesn't prevent the suffering, He'll sustain us through it.

The Vine (John 15:4) is where we're called to abide. Connected to Christ. Dependent on Him. Trusting Him for everything.

But here's what we forget: **abiding in the vine doesn't guarantee earthly victory.**

It guarantees His presence. His sustaining. His strength.

But not always deliverance from suffering.

Jesus abided in the Father perfectly. And He still went to the cross.

The disciples abided in Jesus. And most of them were martyred.

The heroes of Hebrews 11 abided in God. And half of them were tortured and killed.

Abiding doesn't mean avoiding suffering.

It means enduring suffering with God instead of without Him.

What "Something Better" Means

Hebrews 11:40 says God had planned "something better" for us.

What does that mean?

It means the promise they were waiting for - the Messiah, the kingdom, the redemption - wasn't going to be fulfilled in their lifetimes.

They died in faith, still waiting.

But their wait wasn't wasted.

Because God was weaving all of it together - their conquest AND their suffering - into one great story of redemption that includes us.

They didn't get perfected without us.

We're all part of the same faith story.

The ones who conquered kingdoms AND the ones who were tortured.

The ones who shut the mouths of lions AND the ones who were stoned to death.

The ones who got their miracle AND the ones who didn't.

All approved. All honored. All part of God's "something better."

And that "something better" is eternal.

Not earthly healing, but heavenly wholeness.

Not temporal victory, but eternal glory.

Not escape from death, but victory over it.

Where Death Has Lost Its Sting

This is where 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 comes in:

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Death doesn't get the final word.

Even when it looks like death won - when the cancer spread, when the accident happened, when the illness took them - death didn't win.

It just looks like it did from this side of heaven.

But for those who died in faith?

They got the better resurrection.

They got the eternal healing.

They got the "something better" that God promised.

My dad didn't lose to cancer.

He graduated to glory.

Jennifer didn't lose to neuroblastoma.

She woke up whole in the arms of Jesus.

The martyrs in Hebrews 11 who were tortured and killed?

They didn't lose either.

They just got their victory in a different kingdom.

Death has lost its sting.

Not because we always escape it.

But because Jesus conquered it.

And on the other side of death - for those who belong to Him - there's no more pain, no more tears, no more cancer, no more suffering.

Just wholeness. Just glory. Just Home.

Faith in the Meantime

So what do we do while we're still here?

While we're still in the in-between?

While we're still waiting to see if our faith will look like the first half of Hebrews 11 or the second half?

We choose faith anyway.

Not faith that guarantees earthly victory.

But faith that trusts God whether He gives conquest or calls us to suffer.

Faith that says with Job: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

Faith that says with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: "Our God is able to deliver us... but even if He doesn't, we still won't bow" (Daniel 3:17-18).

Faith that says with Paul: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Faith that chooses joy in the middle of the storm (like we talked about last week).

And faith that endures suffering when joy feels impossible.

Now, some of you might be asking: "But what if my faith really is lacking? What if I'm not in the second half of Hebrews 11 because of suffering, but because I don't actually trust God?"

That's a fair question. And here's the test: Are you asking God for help? Even if you're doubting, even if you're angry, even if you're questioning - if you're still crying out to Him, you have faith. Maybe weak faith. Maybe mustard-seed-sized faith. But faith nonetheless. Remember the father in Mark 9:24 who said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" That's faith too.

The presence of doubt doesn't mean the absence of faith. It just means your faith is being refined.

But if you've turned away entirely - if you're not praying, not seeking, not trusting God at all - then yes, that's a different issue. And the invitation is simple: come back. Romans 10:9-10 says if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Start there. Faith begins with coming to Jesus.

Because both are faith.

Both are approved.

Both honor God.

For Those in the Second Half Right Now

If you're reading this and your faith looks like the second half of Hebrews 11 right now - tortured, persecuted, wandering, needy, suffering - I need you to hear this:

Your faith is not lacking.

You haven't failed.

You're not being punished.

You're just in the part of the Hall of Faith that doesn't get preached about as often.

But you're still in the Hall of Faith.

And God still approves.

He sees you. He knows. He's with you in the suffering.

And one day - maybe on this side of heaven, maybe on the other - you will receive what was promised.

Not because you earned it.

But because He's faithful.

And until then?

Keep trusting. Keep enduring. Keep choosing faith even when it doesn't look like victory.

Because the world isn't worthy of you.

And the "something better" God has planned?

It's worth the wait.

Even if the wait lasts a lifetime.

The Final Word

Hebrews 11 doesn't end with conquest or suffering.

It ends with hope.

"All these people won approval for their faith but they did not receive what was promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that they would not be perfected without us."

They're waiting for us.

The ones who conquered kingdoms.

The ones who were sawed in half.

The ones who got their miracle.

The ones who didn't.

All waiting together for the final resurrection. The final victory. The final "something better."

And when we get there - when we finally cross from this side to that side - we'll see that both kinds of faith led to the same place.

Home.

Where death has no sting.

Where suffering is over.

Where promises are fulfilled.

Where faith becomes sight.

Until then?

Trust Him with conquest.

Trust Him with suffering.

Trust Him when you're in the first half of Hebrews 11.

And trust Him when you're in the second half.

Because both are faith.

Both are approved.

And both lead Home.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Your life matters. Even when your faith looks like suffering instead of conquest. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of "Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage." He writes from a Christian perspective as someone whose faith has looked like both halves of Hebrews 11 - conquest in some areas, suffering in others - and is learning to trust God with both.

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