

By Faith...

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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What a wonderful declaration as a body of believers, but just in a sense of transparency, you don't have to raise your hand, you don't have to shout out loud, but anybody had difficulty saying that the last few days that God is good when you look at some of the circumstances and situations of your life? You know, it is not by accident that the words we just sang made the mountain we run to and the water we drink from, did you know in what we know as Israel, the Promised Land, the place where the Lord led his people particularly in the Old Testament, possesses a self-perpetuating water system, the mountains of northern Israel snow-capped, melt in Caesarea Philippi make their way down the Jordan River to the Dead Sea, they evaporate, the prevailing winds take everything back up to the north and it begins all over again. You say, "Why is that so significant?" Because I've been in Caesarea Philippi and I literally drank the water out of the mountain. It's cold, it's crisp, it's incredible. And I've been to the Dead Sea where you don't even want to come close to the same action, but you realize that it's out of that saltiness and out of that dryness that the Lord supernaturally takes the moisture up and he refreshes again. The King of our heart whether the days of recent have been from our perspective good and/or otherwise, he is always doing a work in our lives to refresh us in our time of need.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we continue our time of worship, thank you not only for the truth of these words but the illustration and the land that you have so abundantly given. Lord, as we walk through, as we read, as we study your word today, may this not just be lyrics on the screen, may it not just be physical illustrations of life and history, but may you if not already be the King of our hearts. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews 11, and I realize today that we've got some friends and folks with us who are with us for the very first time, and some of you here maybe for the second or the third time. Whatever amount of times you have been with us, allow me to encourage you to join us on a journey. We as a family of faith are walking through the Scriptures about a chapter, maybe two chapters a day over a period of about three years. It's somewhat of an elongated Bible reading plan but it has a purpose. Rather than just accomplishing the task

within a certain timeframe or such, the goal of this journey is to allow the Scripture a chapter a day, sometimes even half a chapter a day, to become a truly a part of our lives and to somewhat soak into our lives, not just to read it through over four or five minutes, check off a box, but possibly to read it in the morning, the afternoon, even the evening time over and over again to allow the truths therein in our lives.

Today we find ourselves in Hebrews 11, what many would say is one of the great chapters of the Bible. Now understand, 2 Timothy 3 says all Scripture is inspired by God and I would never place one chapter above or below another but when you read Hebrews 11, there's just something about it that grabs the strings of our heart because listed here are over two dozen individuals, men and women who the Lord's hand was upon, who demonstrated a life as we'll see in a moment, by faith. Many people have said that Hebrews 11 is the Hall of Fame of faith. Now what sets Hebrews 11 apart from other halls of fame whether they be sports-based, music-based, industry-based, whatever they may be, is that nobody is listed in Hebrews 11 based on their accomplishments or their successes. Nobody is listed here because of that which they did but rather because of that which they allowed the Lord to do in their lives. Twenty-seven times, more times than the number of names that are listed, the word "faith" is utilized, by faith, through faith, because of faith, and we discover today that the Hall of Fame of faith, not just from what we know as the Old Testament but even in our lives as well, is never achieved by religious endeavor and/or activity but a total reliance on the person of Jesus Christ through faith.

Today as we turn to Hebrews 11, just a couple of concepts that I want to grasp and the first one is this, a picture of what biblical faith really looks like. I want you to notice beginning in verse 1 it says,

1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good report. 3 Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

An incredible prologue, an introduction, because beginning in verse 4, we're going to be introduced to a slate of individuals, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, there's going to be Joseph and Moses and Jephthah, David, Samson and even whom we know as the harlot, Rahab, these men and women with a variety of different means and stories, but one common thread, they lived by faith. And yet here in the first three verses before we hear their individual stories, the Lord gives us a picture of what faith means in general so that it becomes a part of all of our stories, and the first thing we see in verse 1 is this picture of faith that is inward. Notice it says that the evidence, the substance, the proof is for hope. The evidence of the hope that is within us.

You know, that's a word we use a lot in our culture but rarely do we ever see it realized. It is this desire, it is this intense longing for something better and/or greater than we are currently experiencing. From a biblical perspective, when you allow yourself to peruse the passages of Scripture, what we talk about, what is the evidence, what is the hope or

the substance of the things that we hope for? You know, the Bible says in the book of Ephesians that one day through the person of Jesus Christ we can be seated in the heavenlies. In the Gospel of John, Jesus told the disciples that we would possess an opportunity for what he called a mansion. Revelation 21 says that there are streets of gold. And for those of you who are like myself, are somewhat on this aging spectrum, the Bible says that one day we are going to get a new body. That being said, as much as that seat in the heavenlies, that new body that will never wear or tear, the mansion and the streets of gold, the true hope that if we would be honest with ourselves on the inside that we are really longing for is forgiveness and restoration and a right relationship with our Maker, and it says there is evidence, there is substance not just that which we desire on the inside but that which has been demonstrated on the outside.

Notice verse 2, "For by it," faith, "the elders obtained a good report." Now when you get to chapter 12 of the book of Hebrews looking back on chapter 11, it says, "now that we are surrounded with such a great cloud of witnesses," and looking back at these two dozen plus names that are mentioned in this chapter whether it be Abel or whether it be David or whether it be Samson, Joseph, whomever it may be, we see that this longing, this desire, this hope that only can be brought forth through fruition through faith is not a journey that you're on by yourself. It's one that others have gone before you and proven and shown it to be true. Now whether it be the Old Testament saints that are listed here in Hebrews 11, or whether it be the New Testament characters such as Matthew and Mark and Paul and Barnabas and others, we have the privilege unlike these in chapter 11 of Hebrews who are looking forward to the Messiah, who are looking forward to a Deliverer coming, you and I have the privilege of 2,000 years of looking back on an empty tomb, 2,000 years since the angels declared, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" And not only do we have the saints that have gone before us, we also have those of a contemporary age who in some cases have walked among us. Whether it is the early church fathers of the early centuries, or those in the Middle Ages, men who we can name infinitum, but just as far as the contemporary say guys by the name of Luther, Whitefield, Edwards, Moody, Graham, these men and women I could have named such as Moon and Armstrong, great missionaries of days gone by, these men and women who demonstrated a life not desirous of the pleasures of this world but allowing themselves what we need to hear, that and every one of these individuals realized that the significance of the empty tomb was that they all had a sin problem and a hope of forgiveness and restoration that only Jesus Christ could provide.

And lest that not be enough, whether it's that inward hope or that outward testimony, how about if we look up verse 3, "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear." Now I know there are some of you here today that you live in somewhat of a rural area but even in our culture, those rural areas are, shall we say, suspect to artificial man-made light. You know, I've discovered throughout time one of the greatest things we can do to get a true picture of faith is to get in the middle of the night in an environment without artificial light and just look up at the stars. The same stars that Abraham believed in by faith that the Lord would multiply a seed even at a great old age, the same stars that in Genesis 1 when the Lord has fashioned mankind, when he has formed the animals, he

separated the land from the water, and it says he made the stars also. The reason that is an incredible picture to me is this, when you look up at the majesty of the stars and it appears in Genesis as almost an afterthought, he made the stars also, then you go to the book of Proverbs and it says that you and I are the apple of his eye, that if he would put that much time and attention to that majestic of a picture, what does he desire for our lives this day?

So the picture of faith is amazing, but then beginning in verse 4, we have the story of Abel and Enoch and Noah. Then comes Abraham and Sarah. And I want to encourage you to go to verse 13. I want to find ourselves in the midst of the story of Abraham and Sarah and I want to talk about the product of faith. When you and I live as these individuals, when we live by faith, when we orchestrate our life by faith, what can we expect to take place? What other products therein? It says,

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

The first thing I want you to grasp from verse 13 is this: they died in their faith.

Some years ago I had the privilege, my wife Tracy and I, we were visiting a couple. He was a vocational evangelist, he had been preaching the Gospel for many many any years. We were privileged to be in their home, to eat a meal with them, and then after the meal we kind of separated, my wife went with his and I went with John, and as we walked into his office where we would have a cup of coffee and just converse, I immediately began to, shall we say, seek out my inner nerd. If you don't know me well, I'm a nerd at heart. I love to read. I love to study. There is not enough facts in the world that are out there that I don't want to know. That's just who I am. So I began to see all the books and I began to look at the titles and the authors and such, but then something I noticed was peculiar, these books were old. They were dusty. I asked him, I said, "John, when's the last time you've been to a bookstore?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I can't find a book here that's at least 30 maybe 40 years old. What's going on here?" To which he gave me some of the most intriguing advice I've ever heard. He said, "You know with rare exception, I rarely read a book from somebody who's not dead." Now I had just written a book that I was going to give him and I began to second think some things and I said, "What do you mean by that?" Here's what he said, he said, "I'm not saying that what you or anybody else has written isn't true, but I want to read from somebody who finished their race."

You know, when you begin to look at the individuals that are mentioned in Hebrews 11, there are a lot of incredible stories there. There are also some disappointing stories. We love to talk about Abraham and Sarah but how about that Hagar issue? How about David, a man after God's own heart but then there's Bathsheba? Rahab who's mentioned as a harlot? And we could go on and on about the stories and Moses delivering the Israelites but he killed the Egyptian in the midst thereof. And what we discover is it says that they died in their faith, that they didn't pay too much attention to their successes and they did

not get defeated by their failures. They finished their race and you today may be a lot like Jacob, he's mentioned here. Remember, Jacob was wrestling with the angel of the Lord, he said, "I will not let go until you bless me." His hip was pulled out of the socket and he drug that leg across the finish line of life. Maybe today you feel like that's who you are, can I implore you, can I encourage you from those in Hebrews 11, they were not perfect, they were not without fault but they finished. Finish the race.

Then in the middle of this verse 13 it says they were persuaded and they were embracing these promises. In other words, they were holding on much like Jacob did the angel of the Lord. You know, the last two weeks our community has experienced great tragedy. We've heard the stories of many who have lost loved ones, friends, coworkers, and the such, but we've also heard many a story of those who had great provision in the midst of the storm, and as I've had the privilege of sitting down sometimes by way of video, sometimes interpersonally one-on-one and hearing all the stories, some of the things I've noticed is this, that they all have one common thread, that those who experienced provision were holding onto something in the midst of the storm. I spoke to one lady who said she was holding on to another individual. I've spoken to people who said they were holding onto furniture. I've even talked to a guy who was holding onto a water well in the middle of the field not to be blown away, because they realized in the midst of the storms of life you'd better hold on to something bigger and stronger than you to not be blown away.

You know, as a believer in Jesus Christ, there is nothing greater, there is nothing bigger, there is nothing stronger than his shed blood on Calvary and what we know as the empty tomb three days later. That being said, when the storms of life, they were persuaded, they were willing to embrace. If you and I are going to be Hall of Fame believers, we have got to hold onto the blood of Jesus Christ, we've got to hold onto his sacrifice and his resurrection above all other things and items because it is the one item that is bigger and stronger than all others. They were persuaded, they embraced the faith that led whom we know as Abraham and Sarah to go to a land they knew not of. It led Moses to go in to Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go." It led a woman by the name of Rahab to put a scarlet thread out her window.

But there's another interesting product here in verse 13, they died in faith, they were persuaded, they embraced, that last statement, they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. That's interesting to me because a lot of the people that are mentioned, they were very wealthy, they were very influential in a lot of different aspects. Abraham was a wealthy man. Moses was an incredibly influential man. Joseph allowed the Lord and through the Lord's provision was allowed to move up within the Egyptian ranks of the political system not once but twice, and yet they considered themselves pilgrims. They considered themselves strangers. In other words, even though the Lord moved in their lives amidst their culture and such, they never allowed themselves to be immersed in the dark world that surrounded them. They always remained distinct and different, pilgrims and strangers.

Those of you here today who are believers in Jesus Christ, can I give you somewhat of a warning? When the world starts telling you that you are so wonderful and incredible and they couldn't do it without you, you might want to get a little nervous. Why is the world singing so much praise of you, because last time I checked, they put Jesus on a cross, the last time I checked they took the apostles and many of them faced a martyr's death, and throughout time those who have been faithful to the person of Jesus Christ have oftentimes faced such endings.

You know, some of you may think I'm about to go from preaching to meddling but I'm about to go there anyway so just hold on. Get your seatbelts on. We're doing this thing. You know, in our world today, the church of Jesus Christ like these folks, we're not perfect. We've made our fair share of mistakes and we've had some embarrassing blunders and such, but do you find it interesting that even though there are exceptions to what I'm about to say and even though there are a few of what we would call statistical outliers, that when disasters strike, when turmoil takes place in our world, who are the first ones who run to help? It's the faith community, is it not? It's those who collectively under the umbrella of faith, under the name of Jesus Christ, and I realize, I realize that there are some non-faith-based entities and such not only in our community but in others that have faced tragedy, but as a whole when tragedy strikes, it is the church of Jesus Christ that is oftentimes the first to the scene. Let me ask you a rhetorical question: when's the last time somebody was in a horrible accident, was being put into an ambulance and they made a request to go to the local atheistic hospital? Oftentimes our places of physical refuge were either founded by or continued to be underneath the tent of faith.

I find it interesting that there are a lot of entities, in fact maybe it's just me that it gets under my skin, but every day I wake up and there's a new entity, there's a new personality who is telling us the church of Jesus Christ, that they would be better without us. They are telling us that we're archaic, we're bigoted and we're the haters of this world. What I find interesting is where have they been the last two weeks? Oh, I know where they are, they are sitting in their comfortable news station shooting arrows at us and not one of them has grabbed a shovel hardly. Isn't that interesting? It doesn't matter how much good, it doesn't matter how much Gospel, it doesn't matter how much we wrap our arms around a lost and dying world, we're still going to be pilgrims and strangers. They put Jesus on the cross, they killed most of the early believers, what makes us think we would be any different?

So when we live a life of faith, if we are faithful to the end and I hope and pray that you will be as these in chapter 11, please understand you're going to have to hold onto the blood of Jesus Christ and just face the facts that rarely if ever will this world commend you for your distinct, stranger, pilgrim life. In fact, much the opposite, you oftentimes will be criticized for giving a cup of cold water in the Lord's name. Many times you will be criticized for being willing to help somebody just because you love them through the person of Jesus Christ.

So what does all this promise us? What can we take away from this and say in light of what we have seen, in light of what we realize, what are the promises? If you turn the page at least in my Bible, to verse 23, we have the story of Moses, the story of Moses not only being put in the river by his mom but being taken later to what we say, to be weaned by her and eventually raised in Pharaoh's home. I want you to see the promises that we can possess through this faith that we've spoken of. Beginning in verse 24 it says,

24 By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; 25 Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; 26 Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. 27 By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. 28 Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them. 29 By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days. 31 By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.

Real quickly, what are the promises that we have of this faith that we have so spoken of? The first thing you need to grasp is this: it is a decision you must make. Notice what it says, that Moses chose. He made the decision that better to be reproached for the truth of God than to enjoy sin for a season. His success, a man whom we know as Joshua would take those Israelites to the border of what we know as the Jordan River, about to step foot in that famous Promised Land which 40 years earlier they had seen for the very first time in a long time, and what took place? He stood in front of the congregation and here's what he said, "Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether it be the gods on the other side of the flood or the gods that were in Egypt, or the one true God himself." Today when we talk about faith, there is a decision that must be made. Are we willing to admit that we're the problem and that Jesus Christ is the answer? Are we willing to make the decision that no amount of good that we do ever would please God and every amount of bad that we stop will ever justify us before him?

He was willing to choose the promises of God rather than the pleasures of sin. That decision showed that he was determined, he was determined because he knew that sin is seasonal. Now I want you to think about that for just a moment and this may sound a little bit crazy to some of you but I can tell you why we sin. Are you ready? Because it's fun. That's why we do it. If sin was not enjoyable, if we did not like what we get on the backside, we wouldn't participate in it. Here's the problem with sin, it's seasonal. It's just like the Alabama weather, you don't know what you're going to get from one hour to the next. It's spring break and we're freezing today. It was warm just a few days ago. And I'm going to warn you, we'll probably be in a drought by next week. It's seasonal. Sin is the same way. Rather than enjoying it for a brief moment, rather than saying for a few years,

he said, "Do you know what? I'm going to do what Colossians 3 says and I'm going to set my eyes on that which is above versus that which is below."

But ultimately what we all really long for, that inward hope is we just want to be delivered. Now think about it, in this story it says that they came out of the Red Sea on dry ground, and you and I, there are three things that we need to be delivered from that only Jesus Christ can do. The first thing is this, we need to be delivered from our past. Think about the Israelites, 400 years they had been enslaved. That means that nobody knew anybody who had ever known anybody that had ever been free. For 400 years they had been enslaved by whom we know as Egypt and the Pharaoh, and yet it is only the blood of Jesus Christ that can forgive us of our sins. It is only the blood of Jesus Christ that can take the slavery of our sin nature and cover it with forgiveness and restoration.

You know, it's not just the past, it's also the present. Notice verse 30, by faith the walls of Jericho fell down. Let me ask you a question, has anybody got some walls in your life right now? Anybody got some obstruction saying, "I just wish that would go away. I just wish I would have some answers." And you feel a lot like they did, all you do is get up and take another lap and take another lap and take another lap. How would the story have ended if after the fourth day they had said, "I'm done taking laps. This is stupid." You do realize the plan was not intelligent from a human perspective, right? You're going to conquer a well-fortressed city with trumpets, drums and a lot of shouting? But that's what they did. And even on the seventh day, they had taken steps laps around, the total equivalent of what they had done the previous week and yet the Lord said go one more time.

You know, our deliverance in the present may be tomorrow, it may be tonight, it may be that one more lap that you're tired of taking that will make all the difference in the world, but here's the great new, it's the future. Look in verse 31, by faith a harlot Rahab. Now it's interesting, particularly when you have little kids of telling the story in Scripture because every time you come across this woman in the Old Testament, she's never just mentioned by name, she is mentioned with a description, the harlot Rahab. Rahab the harlot. That description goes with her everywhere she is but you think about it, she had a sordid past, did she not? She had a tumultuous present. Here she was even though she took care of the spies, she knew that destruction was coming. She puts out that famous scarlet thread and it was her future that was changed forever. They come through. She is delivered. The city is destroyed. And Rahab other than here in Hebrews 11, she shows up again in the book of Matthew 1 of all places. The genealogy of Jesus. Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, and it begins to walk through these incredible men, and yes, even women, who played a part in what we would call the biological genealogy of Jesus Christ. Here's what I want you to hear: Rahab is mentioned in Matthew 1 without an adjectival descriptor. Only her name, Rahab. Why? Because only in the midst of Jesus Christ can all of our past be erased. Only in the midst of Jesus Christ can all of our present walls come down. And only because of Jesus Christ can our future ever be made secure.

Today we get to celebrate the fact that it's not based on our good works and deeds, if it were we'd all fall miserably short. Today we celebrate the fact that it's not based on the eradication of our bad habits and addictions, if so we'd find ourselves in constant turmoil. It is as described 27 times, it is by faith. Over two dozen people are mentioned in Hebrews 11 as living by faith, the question is are you one of them?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today who maybe for the very first time or maybe for the 10,000th time you heard the message of faith in the person of Jesus Christ, but maybe today, that proverbial lightbulb turned on and you realized your incredible need and desire for Jesus Christ in your life. You may be asking, "What do I do? What's the next step? How do I respond?" I've got great news for you, the Bible says in Romans 10:13 whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Simply that means just to have a conversation with the Lord. I guess if you want to be technical about it, it means to pray. But it's a prayer, it's a conversation that doesn't have to be made out loud, in fact, it doesn't even have to contain the same phrases or even the same words that I might use because it's a cry of the heart in spite of the movement of the lips. If you are that individual today, can I just encourage you to have that conversation? Maybe it would go a little something like this. "God, today I want to confess what you already know, I'm the problem. I'm the one who has sinned. I'm the one who has rebelled. I've tried to be good enough and it hasn't worked. I've tried to stop a bunch of stuff, that didn't work either. So today I'm just coming by faith, I'm coming by faith that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sin on his cross. God, I believe that three days later he rose from the dead and he made it possible for me to be forgiven of my sins and to be saved for all eternity not based on what I could or couldn't do, but based on what he did completely. So right now, God, I don't have all the answers to the problems of life but I do believe that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, if you had that conversation with the Lord, we'd love to celebrate with you. We'd love to have a conversation with you. In just a few moments if you would give us that privilege so that we can celebrate what the Lord is doing, but maybe that conversation isn't based on a first-time decision, though if it is we'd love to celebrate with you, but maybe you're that believer, maybe it's been years, maybe even decades, and you realize you haven't truly been living by faith, you truly haven't been as we saw today in Hebrews 11. Maybe today it's not about coming and having a conversation with me or somebody else, maybe it's about walking out the doors in a few moments and living a distinct life of faith wherever the Lord takes your feet.

Lord, as we come to this time in our service, thank you, thank you that you're a God of mercy and of grace. Lord, we know what we deserve, we deserve judgment, we deserve damnation, we deserve for you to relegate us to the nether parts of the universe, but rather than that you have said that we are worth saving, we are worth forgiving, we are

worthy of a relationship with you. For that, Lord, we say thanks. May we not take it for granted. May we fully embrace it this day. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

If you would, stand with me as our team leads us, whatever decision, I'll be right here at the front.