Living by Faith (Part 2)
Hebrews 11:17-40

Now, before we started studying this Letter to the Hebrews, if you knew nothing else about it, I bet you knew this chapter 11, because it is a real gem. But it's not like some stand-alone jewel is it? Rather it's like a golden link, in the chain of the rest of the letter.

You see, the writer's friends are wobbling, persecution is rising, and some of them are fearful of what the future holds and he's writing to encourage them not to shrink back. And to help them stand strong, he's put an arm round their shoulder, and he's walking them down this hallway lined with the portraits of men and women who have lived out this life of faith, without shrinking back. And he's saying to them and us, 'look, you can do this, just like they did it. There is a way to live that brings pleasure to God and lasting joy to us, even in times of trial, and it's the life of faith.'

And last week he took us past the portraits of Abel, and Noah and Enoch, and then he got to Abraham, and Sarah. And that's where we meet up with him again.

And he tells us, v17, 'By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.'

So even Abraham, *the* great example of faith, had his faith tested. God called him to do something that must have left him bewildered. 'You want me to sacrifice Isaac? But, he's my son, and you gave him to me against all the odds, and he's the one you've promised to build a nation through, you've said his descendants will be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. And you want me to sacrifice him? God, I don't get this.'

And the writer's telling us that there are going to be times when you go through the same kind of experiences, when your faith gets tested, when life and what God calls us to go through in life, seems to make no sense. And the question is, how are you supposed to trust God in those times – when God and life doesn't seem to make sense? Well, look how Abraham deals with it. Verse 19: Abraham 'considered that God was able even to raise him [that's Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.'

So that's the first point here about this life of faith: **Faith knows that God is able**. Abraham knew that God had promised him descendants through Isaac, and yet here was God commanding him to climb up a mountain and sacrifice Isaac; and the only way he could put those two together was 'ok, he's made this promise and I know he will be faithful to it, and this is his command, then I can only conclude that he's going to raise Isaac from the dead.'

And so even though God stopped him going through with it, and provided a ram in Isaac's place, there is a very real sense in which Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead. You see, when Abraham left his homeland in obedience to God, he was prepared to say goodbye to his past. But in offering up Isaac, he's prepared to say goodbye to his future, to let go of his dreams. And he could only do that because he knew that God was able to bring life from death. And there may be times when you are called to go through something that just doesn't seem to make sense, when it looks as though you are being asked to give up your

highest dream or all the hopes you had for the future. And when that happens, faith rests on the fact that God is able, able to turn what others meant for evil for your good, able to work all things for good. And its by looking to that God who is able, able to bring life from the dead, that we can stand when the ground is shaking under us.

But then the writer moved us on to the next portraits, and it's some of Abraham's descendants: Isaac and Jacob and Joseph.

And if Abraham tells us that faith rests on the fact that God is able, these guys tells us that **faith sees the future**. Just look at Isaac and Jacob – what are these guys doing in their portraits? How has he painted them? Verses 20-1: 'By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph.' Now he could have painted them doing a whole load of different things, but he's chosen to show them blessing the future generation, and you can only do that if you know that the future is secure in the hands of the God who blesses. And faith knows that whatever the situation now, God will act and he will act for our eternal good.

And that's what Joseph sees as well. He's dying in Egypt. The promise that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan seem as far away as ever, but still Joseph believes. He just knows that the promises God made to his great-grandfather Abraham stand. And knowing that, he can see the future, he can see that one day his people will leave Egypt and when they go, they're to take his bones with them. Verse 22, 'By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave direction concerning his bones.'

So the patriarchs tell us that faith believes even when times are dark, or when it seems God is a million miles from delivering on his promise. Faith keeps holding on, because it can see the future and knows that God will stay faithful to His promises.

But with that talk of the Exodus, we're under Moses' portrait, and not just Moses, his parents as well: v23, '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.'

Now, the people he's writing to, they knew from personal experience the fear that an edict by a king or a Caesar, could bring. And the writer's saying, look you don't need to give into fear, instead learn from Moses's parents: that **faith knows who is in ultimate control** – and it's not Caesar, or Pharaoh, or politicians, or your boss, or any number of dark forces. Faith knows that God is able, it sees the future, and it knows that it's God who's in ultimate control, so it doesn't bend to fear. And especially, it doesn't need to fear for our children.

Because no doubt that's going through the minds of these Christians in Rome. You face trouble and you think, 'what about the kids, shouldn't I back down to save them?' Or maybe you feel some call of God to missions, or you sense the

prompt of the Spirit to cut your standard of living and mobilise more resources for the kingdom and you look at your kids and think, 'yeh, but what about them?'

But you see, faith trusts God for your kids, because it knows who is in ultimate control. In Proverbs, there's a great little proverb, and as a Dad it gives me courage every time I read it, 'In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge' (Proverbs 14:26). Live by faith, fear God more than anything or anyone else, and your kids will be safe in his hands. Not safe as the world sees safety, but they will have a refuge, an eternal refuge. Because not only is he able, he is also in absolute sovereign control.

But then he's moved us on from the parents and we're under the portrait of Moses himself. And if his parents teach us that faith knows who's in control, Moses tells us that living by faith, inevitably **leads to choices framed by eternity**. Verses 24-26: '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.'

Now, Moses could have had it all, couldn't he? Wealth, learning, power, success, he stood to enjoy a lifetime of privilege. And he give it all up. Why? Because faith looks beyond the world's value system. Faith knows that in the light of eternity, there are things more important than academic success, or reputation, or houses and flat screen TVs, or books and bikes. And yet the truth is that these things can have such a hold on us. When Jesus told the parable of the sower he described 'the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches' (Matt 13:22), which choke the seed of God's word, and stop it bearing fruit in our lives.

Now, why are riches – and let's just be honest and admit that everyone of us in this room is rich – why are riches deceitful? Because they make false promises to you; because they promise what they can never deliver: that they will last forever, and that this is what you really need. And Jesus says, 'no they won't and no you don't.'

And faith sees through the temporary, short-lived nature of this life's blessings. It receives them all – reputation, success, wealth, learning- as what they are: good, gracious gifts from a loving heavenly Father, to be enjoyed and used as He would have us use them, but it knows they aren't the ultimate reward. And Moses knew that. He knew that the eternal future reward, in the Messiah, who he could only see as a shadow, but who we see in Christ in full noonday light, is worth infinitely more than anything the world has to offer.

So when it came to decision time for Moses, 'do I stand with God's people, even if it costs me, or turn my back on them', there was only ever one choice for Moses, and he refused to be squeezed into the world's mould and its values. And he chose to side with God's people and be counted among them even if that involved suffering and loss.

And that is exactly the choice facing the writer's friends. If they stick with God's people, if they maintain their allegiance to Christ, there is every prospect that they will face loss: property, jobs, social standing, maybe even their lives. And the writer's telling them, 'and the one who lives to pleases God, and lives by faith, will make their decision in the light of eternity.'

Now you and I, we don't face those same choices. But we still face decisions: 'what is of more value to me: this relationship, or Christ; this career move, or Christ; accumulating possessions, or Christ.' And I know it is rarely so clear-cut. But when decision time comes, Moses teaches us that faith makes its decision framed by eternity, because it knows that Christ and his reward is of infinitely greater value than anything else on offer.

But then the writer moves us on and now he's pointing out three pictures, two landscapes and one portrait. And the first landscape is Israel crossing the Red Sea and the second, Israel marching round the walls of Jericho. And the portrait is of Rahab, the prostitute, who lived in Jericho. And what these three pictures tell us is that sometimes **faith does crazy things**.

Verse 29: 'By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.' Now, escaping Egypt, Israel found themselves with their backs to the wall, or more literally the sea, and the army of Egypt closing in on from behind, and things look bleak. And then God opens up an escape through the Red Sea, and the waters are like two walls of water on either side of them. Now, what do the people do? Do they think, 'this is crazy, there's no way I'm going in there, this is some freak chance of nature and I'm not risking my life', or do they trust God that he has stayed faithful to his promise to deliver them and take that walk across the sea bed?

Well, that's what they did, and they did so, the writer says, because they were looking to God with faith. But when the Egyptians tried to do it, they weren't looking to God, they were looking at the Israelites and thinking, 'well if they can do it, so can we' and they never made it.

And the second landscape, Israel marching round Jericho, for seven days, following a bunch of priests in long robes, blowing rams' horn trumpets, so the walls fall down. I mean, if ever you wanted a definition of craziness, that's it.

You see, sometimes, trusting that God is absolutely faithful, that He will do what He says He will do, will lead you to do crazy things that would be *totally* crazy if God wasn't in it. And sometimes that will mean you risk your reputation, or your security, or do stuff that makes others who don't have faith think 'you are crazy'. And you would be, if it wasn't that it's God you're looking to and not yourself.

But, before we get carried away and go out doing really crazy stuff, the truth is that when the people of Israel got to the promised land, they still built bridges and got their feet wet fording rivers; and they still had to engage in hand-to-hand combat rather than expect every city to fall over in a pile of rubble. And the truth is that rather than dramatic, crazy acts of faith being the norm, living by faith is

far more often going to show itself by loving your spouse when you feel like you can't, or looking to Jesus as your reward when life seems to offer no reward, or making lifestyle choices that are out of step with those around you.

And to put a human face on the seeming craziness of faith, there's Rahab. And you might think what's so crazy about what she did? Didn't she just save her own bacon? Well, just think about it. And think about it from the perspective of these Christians in Rome facing a city that is becoming increasingly hostile. To be the one person in the entire city of Jericho who sees what God is up to, to be so out of step with the prevailing culture that she sees what no one else sees, to risk her life by helping God's people, because she can see how this is going to turn out. That's crazy, and that's faith, because she's looking to God and His plans and His purposes, above what everyone else is saying and doing.

But then the writer suddenly sees what the time is, and he's still got all these portraits to walk them past, so he tells them, 'come on we need to hurry', v32, 'For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jepthah, or David and Samuel and the prophets.' And he can point out one after another of these men who, verse 33-4, '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.'

And what they teach us, he's saying, is that living by **faith brings great victories**. Faith refuses to accept the status quo, it's always looking to see God's kingdom come and His will be done, and believes He has the power to do it. You see, none of these guys were mighty in and of themselves, were they? Everyone of them was flawed or fearful. But the writer says, 'yes, and God makes strong out of weakness'. He's the God who says, 'my strength is made perfect in weakness.' So for the people he's writing to, and for us, when we are tempted to think, 'yes, but I'm no hero, I can't do this, I just haven't got it in me'; God says, 'yup, and that's exactly the kind of person I can use, to bring about great victories, to see my kingdom come.'

But the writer knows what his friends are beginning to experience, and what you and I may experience, and that is that this life of faith is not one victory parade after another. In fact as he walks us past these last portraits, of men and women whose names we may never know, he tells us, 'yes faith lays hold of some great victories, but **it also holds on in great suffering**.'

Verse 35-38: 'Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise 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.'

You see the life of faith makes zero promise of a carefree life. It offers zero immunity from suffering. In fact, for some, it might just increase it. So what these guys are going through and what you and I might have to go through in one form

or another, is nothing new. But faith gives the ability to hold on in great suffering because it looks past the suffering to the God who's holding on to us.

And it promises great reward. The writer says in v39, that 'all these…' even those who didn't see victories, even those who endured injustice, even those who in the eyes of the world would have looked more like failures than heroes, were 'commended through their faith.' Every one of them received that ultimate commendation, 'well done, good and faithful servant, come, enter the joy of your master.'

And yet the writer says, 'they did not receive what was promised' (v39). They didn't see the ultimate fulfillment: the promised land wasn't it, great victories in battle weren't it, David's kingdom wasn't it, Solomon's temple, in all its glory, wasn't it. And the writer says why, v40: 'since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.'

You see, all these saints who have gone before, who show us what it means to live by faith, and to please God, they only caught a glimpse of what was coming, but we have seen it in all its fullness, and it's Jesus. And it's only in Him that the fullness of the promise comes true, it's only in Him that all the suffering and all the victories of life find their true meaning. And it's in knowing that His suffering on the cross for us, and His resurrection from dead was *the* great victory, that they, and you and I, can be made perfect and complete, as we put our trust in Him and live by faith.