

We live in an unjust world.

This is the hospitality center for Slavic Gospel Association in Irpin, Ukraine, where I stayed two years ago.

And **this is now one of the roads** that leads to that house.



The war against Ukraine has grieved many of you; it provokes me to sorrow for many of the same reasons as it does you — and one more. My cultural and religious heritage is Mennonite. My paternal grandfather was a jeweler; my maternal grandparents were farmers; all my grandparents fled for their lives from the Bolsheviks in the late 19-teens and early 1920s — from a Mennonite community in Ukraine. Now 100 years later, a similar army is invading the same country for a similar purpose; if my family had not escaped, I might be in the middle of that conflict. That's not lost on me.

We live in an unjust world. I have just come back from Dubai teaching on family counseling to people from the Philippines, Pakistan, India, and other middle eastern countries — and I have heard such stories of family injustice that it has made me thankful for the civil laws we have in this country to protect our families (and I know how strange that sounds to your ears).

We live in an unjust world. I have been in a counseling room as a pastor or counselor hearing tragic stories, and internally begged the Lord to give me wisdom and a biblical word because there was no easy answer for the situation. I have wept with people. And then I have gone home and wept more for their suffering.

I have sinned against others and seen the devastation of my sin against them. And I have been sinned against and been overwhelmed with grief and sorrow from the offense. You know both those experiences.

We see the injustice of this world and we are tempted to say, "faith in Jesus doesn't work. He promised a better life, but it just doesn't seem to be better and it certainly doesn't look like it's getting better. Everything is so horribly broken. Should I just give up on Jesus?"

My guess is that we are orthodox enough in our beliefs that most of us would shun from asking that exact question; but my guess also is that most of us have felt that way at times — maybe even recently. The corruptness of the world system and the injustice created by personal sin tempts us to hopelessness. And in our despair we are tempted to give up on Christ, the cross, the church, and Christian relationships.

We are not the first to have felt that way.

The book of Hebrews is about such a group of people that were tempted by the injustice of their suffering to give up on Jesus (“we are suffering, so we must have believed the wrong thing”) and go back to Judaism. The writer to the Hebrews is writing to warn them about the dangers of rejecting Christ, and to encourage them to continue in their faith in Christ.

Over the next few months, I want to look with you at one chapter in Hebrews — most likely the most well-known chapter in this book, Hebrews 11 — and remind us why believing in and following Jesus is worth it, even when we are suffering and experiencing injustice. This morning we are going to look at the writer’s introduction to his answer for the question, “What does it mean to have faith in Jesus when we are suffering?” His thesis this morning will be a repeated theme throughout the chapter —

FAITH IS THE WAY TO HAVE LIFE, AND FAITH IS THE WAY TO LIVE LIFE.

In this opening section, the writer offers **three implications** about an ongoing life of faith — even (especially!) when we live in an unjust world.

The context of faith (10:32-39)

1. An **EXPLANATION of Faith (v. 1)**

- ✓ The various kinds of faith in the New Testament
- ✓ Living faith is confident in God’s future provision
- ✓ Living faith is confident in God when the future is unseen (we don’t live with observed certainties; but we do live with certainties — and a life of faith acts accordingly)

2. The **GRACE of Faith (v. 2)**

3. An **EXAMPLE of Faith (v. 3)**

The context of faith (10:32-39)

- ✓ It is essential to see this chapter not just as a “The Hall of Godly Faith,” but to see how the writer is concerned for the readers and how he is using the godly people in this chapter to encourage the readers.
 - What is said about the readers’ situation before chapter 11 —
 - ... There is an implication of suffering throughout the book, but one of the clearest statements is in 10:32-34 — notice all the kinds of suffering they endured (also 12:4; 13:3).
 - ... They were tempted by sin and apostasy (3:12-14).
 - ... They had stopped growing in their faith (5:11-12)
 - ... They were tempted to leave their commitment to Christ and return to Judaism (6:1-2, 6)
 - ... They were forsaking the fellowship of believers (10:24-25)
 - ... In summary, they were suffering and tempted to forsake Christ to escape that suffering.
 - What is said about “faith” before chapter 11 —
 - ... The book provides a series of warnings about leaving Christ (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-39; 12:15-29). Those warnings also include many admonitions to persevere and endure in the faith, despite suffering (e.g., 4:14; 6:11-12, 10:22, 23; 12:15)
 - ... The key to this chapter is in 10:32ff. They were suffering (10:32-24); even then (especially then) they needed to endure (vv. 35-36) and that endurance comes by faith (v. 38).
 - ... The kind of faith he is talking about is that God will return, set up His kingdom, and right all wrongs (v. 37). Habakkuk 2:3-4 demonstrates faith is an ongoing lifestyle & pattern.
 - ... This is the kind of faith OT saints had, the writer has, and the Hebrews should have (v. 39).
 - The transition into chapter 11 — *now* (11:1). There is no break between 10:39 and 11:1. He is going to expand on the believer’s life of faith.
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- ✓ Notice the examples of chapter 11 —
 - The only OT saints mentioned to this point in the book are Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua. As the writer makes a case for living out their faith, he points only to OT examples (*many* of them). We shouldn’t miss the irony — the readers were tempted to go back to the “OT” and the writer is asserting that those who were tempted to leave Christ to go back to the OT Law were not returning to their spiritual heritage. They were departing from their heritage, because the faithful OT believers clung to their anticipation of Christ.
 - There are remarkable men in the list — Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Patriarchs, Moses...
 - There are unremarkable men in the list — Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah. And despite their accomplishments, men like David and Samuel are both godly and foolish.
 - The emphasis in the list is on God who preserves and keeps people who trust Him:

“The author is not describing the faith of an elite few. He’s selecting some big moments when God enabled faith in the lives of very ordinary believers down the centuries—not to make heroes of them but to remind his readers of how God has enabled his people, including screw-ups like most of us, to persevere through all sorts of difficulty by faith. This chapter is not about superhuman faith. It’s about the kind of faith God has always given his people from the very beginning.” [Coekin, *Faith For Life*, 13.]

- ✓ So this chapter will encourage the readers (both first century and today) that:
 - People lived by faith while suffering in the OT; they can live by faith today.
 - God who sustained believers in the OT has not changed, and He will enable us today.
 - So what is this faith?...

1. An **EXPLANATION** of Faith (v. 1)

• The various kinds of faith in the New Testament

- ✓ There is a kind of faith that is a mental assent to the truth of Christ, but without belief (Js. 2:19).
- ✓ There is the faith that entrusts one’s life to God for salvation and redemption (Rom. 3:28; 4:1ff) — “I can’t save myself — you must save me...”
- ✓ There is an ongoing life and pattern of faith that flows out of one’s trust in God to do what is right in his life circumstances (10:36, 39; 13:7) — it is endurance and persistence with God (and it flows out of faith in Christ for salvation). Faith “is a living thing, a way of life...” [Morris]
- ✓ If the writer had meant faith in terms of salvation, he would have likely used the article (“the faith”), but he didn’t. So the sense is, “faithful living” or “faithful life.” “Faith is the way to live life.”
- ✓ When the author says, **faith is...** it sounds like a definition, but it isn’t a full dictionary definition; rather, it is a description of what faith looks like in a context like the Hebrews (suffering...).
- ✓ The writer will explain this life of faith in two parallel ways in this verse; the character of faith is:

• Living faith is confident in God’s future provision

- ✓ The first thing he says about faith is that it **is the assurance of things hoped for**.
- ✓ The word “assurance” is a word that can mean something like “substantial nature, essence, actual being” of something. It is the “realization” of something (e.g., like a promise). When used of a contract, it was the “title deed” for that transaction (which may be in view here).
- ✓ This word can also be used either objectively or subjectively —
 - Objectively it might mean, “substance” (NKJV; following 3:14) — faith is the foundation of hope. Faith gives things hoped for a substantial reality that will be revealed at the right time.
 - Subjectively means, “confidence,” or “assurance” (NASB) — it is our experience of what comes from faith — we become sure and certain, confident in God who promised (prob. my view).

- ✓ What the believer needs confidence in is what is **hoped for** — i.e., the things promised that relate to God's provision for the end of time — that He will make things right (10:37).
- ✓ A living faith is confident that nothing happening on earth has usurped or overthrown God's plan.
 - Christ will return
 - Christ will rule from David's throne
 - Satan will be bound, sinners will be judged, and sin and death will cease
 - Every tear will be removed from our eyes
 - We will enjoy eternal peace and rest and never be bothered by the flesh and sin (Rev. 20-22)
- ✓ I have an eschatological view of how these things will happen; but that is not the writer's objective. He is trying to get us to look past today and towards eternity and God's faithfulness (1 Th. 5:24).
- ✓ A living faith doesn't deny the hardships and injustice of this world. But a living faith doesn't get overwhelmed by despair because of this world; it looks past this world. Injustice is short and justice is eternal and infinite. Pain is short; pleasure is eternal. We rehearse 2 Cor. 4:16-18.
- ✓ This was the practice of faithful people in this chapter — vv. 13, 25, 35-40.
- ✓ When we suffer and the world goes wrong it does not mean our future is changed. We keep looking forward to Christ, established and certain of God who will fulfill His promises.
- ✓ There is a second characteristic of faith in this verse...

• Living faith is confident in God when the future is unseen

- ✓ This phrase is parallel to the first and expands the idea slightly with further explanation...
- ✓ The word **conviction** refers to "evidence" or "proof." The point is that it is not a rash, subjective, feeble, childish wish; it's not "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die." It is reality. What is the reality?
- ✓ It looks at something substantive, though the substance is **not seen**. We don't have to physically see what we believe in order to experience the reality of it. "Faith extends beyond what we learn from our senses..." [Morris] We know the reality, though we can't see or touch it (vv. 39-40).

"...Christian faith is solid confidence in future and unseen realities promised in God's word. Notice that although these future and unseen realities are not accessible to our physical senses, they are still real...He is saying that we live by what we know of future and unseen realities revealed to us in God's utterly reliable word, the Bible. So faith is confidence in things promised in the gospel that are either 'what we hope for' (the future new creation) or 'what we do not see' (the spiritual realms). This isn't a complete definition of faith. But it's what flagging Christians need." [Coekin, 25.]

- ✓ What is it that we don't see? We don't see the future, but that's not what he means here. There is conviction, despite not seeing. What is our conviction? That God is working behind the scenes.
- ✓ "Christians should be the boldest people in the world — not cocky and sure of ourselves, but sure of Him." [Tozer] The hymn writer, William Cowper wrote this:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
 He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm.
 Deep in unsearchable mines Of never-failing skill
 He treasures up His bright designs And works His sovereign will.
 And ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds you so much dread
 Are big with mercy and shall break In blessings on your head.
 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense But trust Him for His grace;
 Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
 His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding every hour;
 The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flower.

- ✓ Oh friend, just because we can't see the future or God's working hand, don't despair. He is sure.
- ✓ The first clause is "forward looking" — it looks beyond today to our eternal tomorrow (**hope**).
- ✓ This clause looks squarely at the present situation and says "I see something you do not..." They discern the activity of the invisible God in the midst of the circumstance (e.g., Moses in v. 27).
- ✓ We don't live with *observed* certainties; but we *do* live with certainties — and a life of faith acts accordingly.

2. The **GRACE** of Faith (v. 2)

- We like to do "cost-benefit" analysis. Does the benefit outweigh the cost? We know that there is a cost to living this way (the writer doesn't hide the cost, vv. 35ff); what is the benefit of living this way?
- There is great benefit, and the benefit was seen historically in the OT — **by it** (faith), **the men of old** (lit., "the elders," the "fathers" of the OT) **gained approval**.
 - ✓ To **gain approval** from God means something like, "God has testified about their faith" — (marg. trans. is "obtained a good testimony"). This is God's final evaluation of their lives — akin to "well done, good and faithful slave" (Mt. 25:21ff; and note that *it is possible* to receive this evaluation).
 - ✓ It has been noted that "pleasing God is of the greatest possible importance. He does not set his heart on gaining human approval; that can be dangerous. He longs that at this present moment he is earning God's approval and that in the end God will express it." [Raymond Brown, 198.]
 - ✓ Notice also that the means to gaining approval from God is living by faith. We please God by living by faith — it is "the key that unlocks everything in the Christian life." [Kruger, 162.]
 - ✓ MacArthur observes, "Faith is not simply one way to please God; it is the only way...(v. 6)."
 - ✓ So one result of living by dependent faith on God — "I don't see, but I believe," is that we receive the grace of God's approval of us. We are given the gift of His pleasure and delight in us.
- Take a moment and compare this verse with **10:38** (Hab. 2:4). Living by faith pleases God and gains His approval. It has always been that way — in both the OT and the NT (cf. also **11:6**).

3. An **EXAMPLE** of Faith (v. 3)

- Before providing illustrations of many who have demonstrated the kind of faith that he explained in verse 1, the writer provides an example in v. 3 of a kind of faith the readers already exhibit.
- The example he gives is not only something the readers already believe, but it is also the very oldest kind of faith in God — ***by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God...***
 - ✓ He is speaking about the creation account in Genesis 1-2. There not only is no older example in the Bible, but there is no older example of faith in history, for this was at the beginning of history.
 - ✓ Notice that he uses the phrase ***by faith*** for the first time. The word ***faith*** appears 32x in Hebrews, but 24x in this chapter. This chapter is about faith. And this phrase appears 18x in the chapter. And it connects directly to 10:38 and Hab. 2:4. The believer's life is one that is lived by faith.
 - ✓ ***World*** is actually “the ages” and refers not just to the physical world, but God as the originator of everything in time and history — everything we know in this world is by Him.
 - ✓ And God simply spoke and it was. The word ***word*** emphasizes His “utterance.” He not only created by this utterance, but He also sustains everything with His declaration (**1:3**), and He will one day judge with His utterance (**12:25-29**).
 - ✓ The point that the writer is making is that no man saw the moment of creation (***what is seen***), yet we live dependent on that act, trust that He will continue to sustain the world. And if we can trust Him to keep the earth in orbit around the sun, we can trust Him about the future that is also unseen.
 - ✓ This verse also identifies a fundamental premise of the Christian worldview — everything proceeds from and belongs to God. That truth will shape the way we live and is essential to being Christlike.
- What do we not see in this world? We do not see the exalted Christ (2:8), God (v. 27), the past creation (v. 3), the fulfillment of future promises (v. 1), and the future judgments (v. 7). And all those things are far more valuable and significant than what we see in this world — which means what is *unseen* is of greater importance and value than what is seen. And when we give attention to the valuable realities, it will transform the way we live today.
 - ✓ What is most important is not what Fox News says about the war in Ukraine or what your favorite blogger is writing and tweeting about on social media. Those things are all short-lived.
 - ✓ What is most important is the supremacy of God and the faithfulness of God to His people.
 - ✓ He has sustained all His people in all their trials; He will sustain us — our calling is to live ***by faith***, believing that He really is faithful to keep us.

CONCLUSION: I have been greatly encouraged this week by reading Richard Coekin's *Life for Faith*:

Christians are tempted to shrink back from public loyalty to Christ when we forget where we belong. We don't belong to this godless world that we so foolishly try to impress. And we don't belong with fairweather church people who drift away when they feel the scorching heat of criticism... We belong with the great cloud of witnesses in chapter 11, who didn't shrink back.... [17.]

How can we shrink back from loyalty to Christ when every night sky and every rumble of thunder reminds us of his power to keep his promises?...We can trust [His] promise even if everyone in the office tells us it's nonsense, because, by faith in his word, we know what God can do. You too can be confident—sure of what you hope for (confident in God's power to keep his promise of a new creation) and certain of what you do not see (confident in God's loving provision even though you can't see him)—because you live in an amazing universe that proves the power of God's word! [31]

This is life...by faith.

BENEDICTION: Ephesians 3:20-21