

*Storytellers: The Grand Adventure*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Exodus 14:21-30; Luke 5:18-25; Hebrews 11:32-12:3*

Our final Scripture reading today is Hebrews 11:32-12:3. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated -- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

My dad used to say to me all the time, “Life is an adventure.” I didn’t really understand what he meant. He wasn’t a world traveler; the furthest he got during my lifetime was Niagara Falls and a border town of Texas. He lived the last 24 of his 49 years in one place, a condo on the south side of Indianapolis. He was a caterer; he didn’t have money for expensive things or exotic trips. We rarely went on vacation if it wasn’t to upstate New York to see my grandparents. He didn’t play sports, go camping, or do anything athletic. About the most exciting thing he did was set up a couple of suites at the Indy 500. I just didn’t get it.

For my dad, though, it was a matter of perspective. Every day, he met people at his job and had the chance to serve them the very best he could. When problems turned up – and in my dad’s life, they always turned up – instead of letting them conquer him, he considered them a part of the adventure. And the key to my dad’s life was his relationship with Jesus Christ. He was a workaholic, he had lots of issues, but he knew he wanted to stand on the side of Christ. That was the lynchpin of his adventurous heart.

I am convinced that the core problem with our evangelism is that it is too weak. We sell the story of Jesus short. Karl Marx called religion “the opiate of the masses,” a falsehood sold to people to drug them into a stupor about their misery. If that’s what Christianity is, I don’t want it either. But our passage from Hebrews gives us something else entirely. It paints a completely different picture of what faith is all about.

Christianity is often considered a feminine religion, one that appeals to women. More than 2/3rds of church attendees in the US each weekend are women. Part of the reason that many men aren't interested in Christianity is because it emphasizes love, peace, and patience, our relationship with God, our powerlessness without Him. It sounds unmasculine. But the author of Hebrews shows us that the faith of God's people is for everyone, men and women, and the adventure of a life of faith is like nothing else imaginable.

Hebrews 11 is about all the heroes of faith and what occurred to them. Before our particular passage, Hebrews 11 discusses Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and Rahab – they're all listed, all that they received and experienced because of their faith in God. Then comes the summary we just heard: through faith, the people of God “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised...[they] shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; [their] weakness was turned to strength and [they] became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”

That's a crazy-amazing list. It includes the highest achievements of the ancient world and blessings that could only be called supernatural. It reads like the screenplay from an Indiana Jones movie – only it's not a movie, it's the story of real people in real human history! Hebrews 11 describes the life of faith as an incredible adventure with God.

And despite what we may think, these folks were ordinary in all but one respect – God chose to work through them. They are no different from us. In fact, they seem more sinful than us, not less. Noah got incredibly drunk in an event that blew apart his family relationships. Abraham is so unconvinced of God's protection that he passes off his wife as his sister so that no one kills him and marries her. At first, Sarah scoffs at the idea that she can bear a child in old age. Jacob is a trickster who scams his brother out of his father's blessing. Moses kills a man and runs away for sixty years. Rahab was a prostitute, Gideon a coward, Samson promiscuous, David an adulterer and murderer, Elijah depressed, and Jonah unwilling. They all were used by God and loved the Lord, they trusted Him, but boy, this is not a who's who of good people! This is a list of broken sinners that God made into saints by His own hand.

That list is still the list we like, the list of people we might remember from Sunday school, the champions. But there's another set, a darker set, that Hebrews 11 includes. He describes what happened to the prophets: tortured, but refused release to obtain a better resurrection. Jailed, flogged, imprisoned, executed in horrific ways, abandoned, left wandering, homeless, wearing tatters for clothes. And Hebrews says about these folks who seemed cursed: “the world was not worthy of them.”

If we don't often see the incredible miracles of the first list, this second list sounds familiar. When we hear of ISIS crucifying Christians in the Middle East, when we learn of a shooter in the US releasing unbelievers but executing Christ-followers, we see this list in our own day. We're shocked and stunned by it; we want to do something about it; we sign petitions to get our representatives in Congress involved and pray for them. As well we should.

But the miraculous thing is that they refused to let go of their belief in God, refused to be released, refused to turn from their faith. The world was not worthy of the prophets, and it is not worthy now of the new martyrs. And their faith is effective. More than one ISIS executioner has turned to the gospel, turned because these men, men with families and young children, men with their whole lives ahead of them, are singing songs to their killing fields, singing of their blessed Jesus, giving their captors their copies of Scripture, praying, “Father, forgive them.”

These Christians know what we Christians in the West do not...that Christianity is not about living a long life here and now, about having homes or cars or material things or living long enough to see the latest movies or read the latest books. Christianity is not an opiate to make us feel better about our status. Christianity is not about family life, though God teaches us how to raise families that honor Him. Christianity is not about good works, though we do them as they please our Father in Heaven.

Christianity is about a relationship with Christ, about having the Holy Spirit living inside of us, guiding us, about being united with Christ just as He is united with the Father and the Spirit. When we know that adventure, when we know that peace, when we know the joy of God’s love that can never be taken away from us, even the very worst that can be done to us cannot steal away our joy of being united to Christ. Christianity does not make us feel better about our lot in life; it leads us headlong into the adventure of following Christ wherever He goes, to the corner grocery or the far corners of the globe, to wealth that we use to honor him or poverty in which we recognize his sufferings, to life or to death, we go with Him.

There is no reason to believe that God does not still work in this way, in our era, all of it, both the incredible supernatural intervention and His empowerment of divine boldness in the midst of suffering, death, and the worst that the devil and his lot can throw at us. Hebrews 13:8 tells us, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” He didn’t suddenly stop empowering His people, stop giving us crosses to bear, stop giving us supernatural help to overcome them. We live in an unbelieving generation in an unbelieving land that does not expect miracles or acknowledge them when they happen, so they may look different than they did 2000 years ago. But they are still happening!

We should be expecting more of the incredible work of God than they did, because we live in the era of Christ! As Hebrews says, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” None of them had the gift of the Holy Spirit living with them 24/7. None of them had God’s presence with them in a real and tangible way all the time to rely upon.

God had something better planned for us – His Son! His salvation! His Holy Spirit living in us as we become His new temple! They longed for our day. The Old Testament era saints, their faith was made complete, their salvation and perfection, their sanctification we call it, was only finished once the work of Christ on the cross was done. Now, together with us, they know the fullness of the inheritance promised to all of God’s people. They saw only a small taste of the richness God poured out through Jesus on us. We get to know the full story. We can expect so much more!

So...why don't we? Why don't we? What is the reason our faith is so lackluster? Why don't we see the promises of God fulfilled in ways that make us tell everybody at work or the store or on Facebook and Twitter? Why do we live counting on so little from God when He promises the nations as an inheritance for His people, promises us souls to win, promises us brothers and sisters to usher into the Kingdom as friends beyond this life?

It comes down to the one take-home for us today, found as Hebrews 11 moves into chapter 12. Hebrews challenges us: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus."

Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus. All these witnesses show us the power and presence of God that we can trust and rely upon. Fix our eyes on Jesus, and we become untangled from sin. Fix our eyes on Jesus, and we run the race God has prepared for us. Fix our eyes on Jesus, and we throw off everything that hinders us from the great adventure of faith.

Why do we grow weary and lose heart? Why do we fail to see God's noble Spirit as work and His hand alive and well and working in our neighborhood? As Hebrews warns, we have not considered Christ; we have not drawn deeply from His well of living water ourselves; we have become distracted and discouraged and tired because we have forgotten why we're running the race of the Christian life in the first place. So we walk at a snail's pace and believe that's all that the Christian life has for us.

So instead, we're told, focus on Jesus, "the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." He endured hardship like no other to receive glory like no other, to sit down at the right hand of His Father. Keep your eyes on Him, and all the things you experience in this life will have clarity. They will not be random events, lucky circumstances or bad breaks. We will see them through godly lenses, and we will see the hand of God. We will see life as an adventure and be able to encourage others to follow into that grand adventure with us.

Last week, I had the opportunity to meet with other local pastors as I often do once a month. We have lunch, we talk about what God is doing, and we ask for prayer for our lives and our ministries. I shared about how funding we had counted on fell through and how we've been waiting for a while to hear back about the possibility of being in a local school; Josh, my friend and pastor of Evident Church, shared much the same. I shared that I've grown impatient. And the new chaplain at the Village of East Harbor said, "Don't be anxious about the wait. Instead, live in anticipation of what the Lord is going to do."

At first, it seemed a little Pollyanna-ish. We're all old enough here to know Pollyanna, right, the little girl who put a positive spin on the worst things imaginable? But the truth is, if I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength, as Philippians 4:13 promises, if I will receive the crown of life after we stand the trials, as James 1:12 says, if nothing can separate us from the love of God, as Romans 8:38 assures us, then we have every reason to be looking on the bright side. God answers our prayers, He comes through in every situation; why should we not rejoice and expect God to provide what we truly need?

We have seen answered prayers in this church. We've had Annetta and Sandi back with us. Our friend Heather, who we prayed for last week – they were worried that her ocular migraine could have been caused by anything from cancer to a stroke. It turns out it's a simple problem, one that still requires treatment, but far less than what could have been.

CrossWay has been struggling financially since our friend Mary's departure to the Cincinnati area, but just last week Living Hope EPC down in Grosse Pointe sent \$1,000 to help us which arrived at just the perfect time. We've prayed for part-time work for me when my job at NorthShore fell through. This last week, I had two days' work at the Milford Proving Grounds helping with consumer testing on cars – for the exact amount of money I was to be paid at NorthShore. God provides at just the right time, exactly what we need, exactly enough to keep our eyes focused on Christ.

We can either be discouraged that our fellowship is made up of about 30 people, or we can get excited at the possibilities God has ahead for us. We can place our hopes on the next piece of entertainment to fulfill us and wind up being disappointed, or we can place our hopes in Christ and find that whatever hobbies we enjoy become richer and fuller because they point us back to the greatness of our God. We can shrink back from showing love to our friends and neighbors in fear that they might reject us, or we can move ahead in faith and love and show extraordinary kindness knowing that God will move in the hearts and minds of those He has claimed as His children. Which will it be?

This isn't easy. I can be a pessimist. I don't always look back on my father's viewpoint kindly. But he was right. Life with Christ is an adventure, a glorious one that points us to new horizons, new hope, and new life eternal. Even in bleak moments when all seems lost, God is with us, guiding us to greater heights in Him. Neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Are you living in fear, or living in adventure? The good news is the best story there is. Let's live that way this week.