

Overcoming Fear Hebrews 11:23-40

This fall we're focusing on Living By Faith in Troubling Times and so far we have seen what faith is – it's believing in God and the gospel of Jesus Christ and that all the unseen spiritual realities that the Bible teaches are true. But it also includes being confident of receiving the things God has promised and that he rewards those who seek him. So, faith not only affects what you believe and think, but it changes how you live your life. People of faith live in obedience to God and are different than the unbelievers around them.

We've also seen that in order to live by faith and not cave in and conform to the pressures and opposition we feel from the sinful world around us we need to learn how to live like strangers and exiles here on earth. This world is not our home. Heaven is. We can go through suffering and hardship and the loss of things in this life knowing that we have a better homeland waiting for us. So we need to learn to live like strangers and exiles and I hope you had some good reflection and discussion about that this past week.

Today we're going to look at another critical aspect of living by faith we need to grow in, especially when we face troubling times. To begin, I want you to think about times in life where you've had to face something dangerous you were really afraid of. Maybe a person or group of people, or an animal, or a task. For some of you this may have been a regular occurrence. For others it might have been more rare. What things have made you anxious and caused your heart to race – where you felt that knot in the pit of your stomach?

Now, I want you to try to remember how you responded. What did that danger and fear cause you to do? People have studied these things and identified several common responses:

- Fight – confronting the threat
- Flight – running away
- Freeze – becoming physically immobile
- Fawn – trying to appease someone
- Flop – becoming limp or unresponsive
- Faint – losing consciousness

Chances are you've responded in some of those ways to the dangers you've faced.

In the past few weeks we've acknowledged that if the hostility toward Christians in America continues to grow, one of the dangers we could face in the future is persecution. Millions of Christians are going through it right now in different parts of the world. People are being threatened, arrested, beaten, and even killed for their faith in Christ. And persecution could end up happening here. How are you/we going to respond to it?

As we continue studying Hebrews 11, we're going to see several examples of people who faced danger and persecution because they were following God. And on one hand, they had different responses. Sometimes they fled to safety, sometimes they went into hiding, and sometimes they fought against an enemy. But on the other hand, they also all had a similar response and I think that's what the author is pointing out – something that's critical for us to have when we're facing troubling times, danger, fear, and persecution. It's an aspect of faith that we need to be aware of and grow in. So first we're going to look at their examples and then identify what they had in common so we can become like them.

Hebrews 11:23-28

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. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

So we see both Moses and his parents in these verses and both faced very dangerous situations. Moses' parents were slaves in Egypt and faced the danger of disobeying the king's edict. Pharaoh had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be cast into the Nile River, but Moses' parents kept him hidden – all throughout the pregnancy and birth and the first 3 months of his life. I don't

know what the punishment was for slaves who were found with a baby boy, but I'm assuming it would have been very painful and ended in death. They faced that danger, but they didn't give in.

Moses is the next example, and he was in an interesting situation. He was the son of a Hebrew slave but grew up as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. All the wealth and pleasures of Egypt were his for the taking, but when he grew up he faced a life-changing decision. He saw an Egyptian beating a slave and had a choice to make: would he save his Hebrew brother, or would he walk away and continue as a prince of Egypt? He chose to save his brother and ended up killing the Egyptian. By doing so he was "willing to be mistreated with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin." In Verse 27 it says, "He considered the reproach of Christ of greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt," and that probably refers to his willingness to suffer for his people like Christ suffered for us. So Moses faced all kinds of danger and fear, but he never gave up.

The other examples in these verses from Moses' life take place at the time of the Exodus. Despite the danger of Pharaoh's anger, he obeyed God and led the people out of Egypt. He also obeyed God and led them to observe their first Passover the night before the Exodus, which was the same night the angel of death passed through and killed the firstborn. Dangerous situations, but the author is pointing out that Moses followed through. He obeyed God and didn't turn away.

The next section has a whole bunch of examples and you're going to see they all have something in common.

Hebrews 11:29-34

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. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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.

In all of these examples, the people faced very dangerous situations. The Israelites faced the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh's army on the other. They also faced the walls of Jericho and the army behind them. Rahab faced the soldiers of Jericho. Gideon faced a huge Midianite army. Barak faced Sisera's army. Samson faced the Philistines. Jephthah faced the Ammonite army. David faced multiple enemies and armies. Samuel faced the wrath of Saul and the Philistine army. The OT prophets (Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, others) faced the evil kings of Israel, Judah and other nations. You can also see there's mention of Daniel who faced the lions' den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who faced the fire of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace.

All of these were very dangerous situations. All were life-threatening. But rather than disobeying God and giving in to fear, they obeyed and stood firm. Here we see that having done so, many of them experienced victory, growth, and deliverance in this life. But that's not how it always goes and the author points that out next as he describes what happened to many of the Old Testament prophets. Many of these men suffered and died because they didn't give in.

Hebrews 11:35-38

³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection (the ministry of Elijah & Elisha). Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment (Jeremiah, Hanani, Micaiah). ³⁷ They were stoned (Zechariah), they were sawn in two (Isaiah & Jeremiah), they were killed with the sword (Uriah & many others). They went about in skins of sheep and goats (Elijah & others), destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Things didn't go well in this life for these Old Testament prophets, but they never turned their back on God. They never denied him in the face of danger and persecution. They were faithful until death.

As the author ends this section about all these people of old who were people of faith, he makes these closing statements...

Hebrews 11:39-40

³⁹And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

He's referring to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and how all people of faith, both in the Old Testament and New are made perfect in Christ – redeemed, forgiven, reconciled, and one day resurrected and given glorified bodies to dwell in our eternal home. Having died before seeing the Messiah, the people of old did not yet receive what was promised. And yet, they lived by faith and persevered through every danger, facing every fear, even willing to die for their faith.

As we look at all these examples we've seen today, we can see they all had faith. But there's a particular aspect of faith that I think is being highlighted through all their stories. It's something that you and I are going to need in order to live by faith in troubling times, in danger, and in persecution. It's a response to fear that didn't make it on the natural response list. It isn't fight, or flight, or freeze, or fawn, or flop, or faint.

What is it? I would call it COURAGE.

All of these people faced their fears and had courage. They didn't give up, give in, turn back, turn away, or deny their Lord. They had courage, and courage is what you and I are going to need in the days ahead.

I think we all know what courage is, but I want to point out a few things. First of all, having courage doesn't mean you're not afraid. In fact, if you're not afraid, you don't really need courage. To have courage means when you are afraid, you do it anyways. You persevere; you endure; you push through; you hang on; you obey; you trust; you stand; you help; you fight.

Second, courage isn't just a feeling that you muster up, like at a pep rally before a big football game. It isn't just getting pumped up for something. It also isn't emotional numbness or the absence of fear in dangerous situations.

And it isn't just confidence because you're a lot stronger than the enemy you're facing. It isn't based on feelings, or lack thereof, or favorable circumstances.

From the examples we saw today, courage springs from faith in God. It's believing God is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do. If faith is the root of a tree; courage is the trunk. It's standing firm on the promises of God. It's choosing to believe him and walk in obedience rather than turning away in fear. It's willingness to put your life and future in his hands no matter what the cost, trusting in his promises of future blessing.

We saw a lot of courage in the examples we looked at today, and they were all commended for it. What about you and me in the days ahead? Will we be men and women of courage?

As you reflect on the sermon this week I want you to pray about what you need to do to build courage into your life. Do you know the promises of God? Do you love him more than all things? Are you willing to suffer for the sake of his calling and kingdom?