

# Time Would Fail Me

By  
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From the Pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalms 80:1-2, 8-19

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. 9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; 11 it sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. 12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. 14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine, 15 the stock that your right

hand planted. <sup>16</sup> It has been burned with fire; it has been cut down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. <sup>17</sup> But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. <sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. <sup>19</sup> Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

<sup>29</sup> By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. <sup>30</sup> By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup> By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.<sup>32</sup> And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.<sup>35</sup> Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup> They

were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-<sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. <sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

This might be an observation or might rise to the category of interesting factoid. I wasn't surprised when I read through different commentaries on Hebrews and found that they disagreed on almost everything, they all found different parts of the Greek to nit-pick. What was surprising, was what they agreed on. Every single one bemoaned the fact that Hebrews is too often over-looked in teaching and preaching. Each commentary warned the reader about looking at a section over reading the whole. Of being distracted by details and history of the book and missing its heart, its key message.

Now, because I am a little bit of a contrarian, let's risk being distracted for a moment by the details: Hebrews is unique. While it is included in the "Letter section" of the New Testament and even titled "the letter to the Hebrews." It is *not* a letter. It is a sermon, a single sustained theological argument about the nature of Christ. It is impressive: quoting from the Hebrew scriptures with flair and nuance. If you read older commentaries, scholars would argue that the author misquotes scripture. But more recent discoveries show us that the quotes reflect the scriptures that were circulating in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century. The author knew their bible. It is demanding, expecting it's readers, or more likely listeners, to keep up. It is demanding as it draws from diverse theological and philosophical sources. It plays with language and rhetoric—running circles around the rest of the New Testament's rather pedestrian Greek.

We don't know who wrote it. There are stories and theories of course, even a strong argument that it was written by a woman. As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson acknowledges it is the only Epistle that is included because of its substance alone, without regard for its author.

We could spend the next week here in the sanctuary just working through the theology of the book. When the women in Coffee Cup Bible study faithfully dug through Hebrews over the course of almost ten weeks—and there was more to be said.

As I was preparing, what struck me about the consensus around this collection of 13 chapters sandwiched between the letter to Philemon and Peter's two epistles, was the universal acknowledgment that while the book is a theological masterpiece, it is also deeply *pastoral*.

We don't know the original audience, the first congregation to hear these words; but there are indicators that things are not going well for them. Details are peppered throughout the book: members of the community have suffered for their faith (10:32-35), their goods and homes have been plundered (10:34), and the author acknowledges their drooping hands and weak knees (12:12), moreover, it is clear that the author is not making a promise that everything is going to get better, they know more suffering is ahead.

James Olthuis describes the community as “*living in an insecure, anxiety-provoking society*.” I don’t think those are words that are bound to the 1<sup>st</sup> century church. Insecure and anxiety provoking, just think they didn’t have smart watches the buzz every time there is a news alert, a weather warning, a new text comes in, or an alarm goes off to remind you of something... something very important.

The sermon’s pastoral voice isn’t just found in the community it acknowledges, but also in the argument made. There is a common thread seeking to remind the people that God actively responds to the reality of our human condition. The author cites all the ways that God speaks, creates, covenants, pledges, calls and commits to us again and again—A creator willing to stretch and move beyond our imagining to be here with us. It explains that Jesus is the how God has chosen to speak and to be with us. His life, death, and resurrection ultimately change our relationship with God.

It is pastoral—in that it holds, gently and lovingly, the listening community; whispering *again and again that the Christ that they have chosen to follow will not forsake them*. These words that have spoken again to the church over two thousand years. That is a good sermon.

That deeply pastoral voice and theological brilliance collide when we come to chapter 11 and 12. It’s near the end of the sermon—the *really*

*good part*. Just before our passage, at the beginning of chapter 11, we are given the definition of Faith as *the assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things unseen*. Following that definition, the author starts to list stories of God's people and how they lived in faith. They are not crafting a philosophical argument; rather they are making an argument shown in the lives of these characters. It starts with complete narratives, and by the time we get to this passage the tone shifts.

I think the author realized that eventually everyone would be mad if the coffee was cold and it wasn't fair for the Sunday school teachers to have to stretch the lesson an extra 20 minutes, so there's a shift from story to simply giving names and experiences. "For time would fail me" the author explains if all the stories, that doesn't mean they stop.

Now it's a list of names without stories and stories without names. As the experiences are described, I could imagine a few people shift in their seats as their lived experience was spoken as part of this holy narrative: they knew about war, good and bad, they had experienced what mocking and imprisonment, destitution and persecution meant. That the original preacher didn't pen those words thinking of a family or a member of the congregation who had seen chains all too recently.

Of course—as good Biblical readers we could tie each one of these stories back to a particular story in the New Testament, and we can also start to

see the expansive story that is being woven. The author is starting to expand the scope of the story beyond a single But the author is doing more by describing the *complexity of living your faith*.

Yes, some conquered armies **and** some were stoned. Some shut the mouths of lions **and** others hid in caves. Faith is not the assurance of *good things*.

Yes, Gideon, Barak Samson, etc. were incredible, giants of the faith, but, Gideon tried to test God with a silly experiment involving fleece and dew. Barak was too afraid to fight. Samson's hair was cut in an act of hubris. Jephthah made rash declarations that destroyed lives. David... well there's a lot to be said about David, and Samuel burned hot and cold. No one listed in that long line was perfect. Not a one. *Faith is not something perfected, it is something that lived, where mistakes are made, and we try again.*

Trying to make a faithful way, is not for the faint of heart. It's not for the perfect. It's not always pretty. But it is faithful.

The word we translate as conviction in the original definition of faith at the beginning of chapter 11 is from the Greek word *Hypostasis* has a legal meaning, it is a down payment or a pledge. Faith in Hebrews is not some



abstract word that we paint on a wall or use as a slogan, it is lived fidelity, a token and a trust, a promise that we carry with us.

With all of the rhetorical tricks and beautiful greek, the only way the author could describe faith is to tell the stories of the people who lived it, to remind that congregation sitting together so long ago, that their story and the ancient story are not that far off. We are all people scrambling through holes and the holy for something greater.

In our 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum, one of the goals is to have students begin to make connections between the lives of these biblical figures and their own. It is a joy to sit with them as they find out about Daniel having his name changed when he is taken to Babylon, the meaning they find when Elisha loses his temper or Esther speaking up. These ancient stories weave into their own, tethering them to something greater; showing them how the faithful have made their way before and giving them the imagination to see how they might make their own way. We use these stories to teach us.

But neither in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade or in an 1<sup>st</sup> century church, do we rely only on the ancient stories. The author of Hebrews was talking to a living community that was living their faith in that moment. Even in that insecure, anxiety-provoking place, the author was looking at the great cloud of witnesses sitting right there in the room.

I wonder who are the examples you look to? Are they written on the pages of scripture? Or is it someone else? Someone who showed you their faith lived out in the every day.

In our fourth and fifth grade class, we not only talk about people in the Bible, but we also invite members of the congregation to come join them in class. So that our students can see someone who has made their way—a real person, flesh and blood.

I wonder who are the people, or who is the person, who helped you? Who modeled faith for you?

Take a moment, I'll hold the space. Think back? What was their name, when was the moment? Is it hero of the faith found on the pages of scripture? Or is it someone else? Whose story gives you strength?

As a pastor, my understanding of faith would fail me if all I had were the words of Hebrews 11. Faith is not a thing to define, it is a thing to be lived and when I am at a loss, when my own faith feels a little overdrawn, I have the privilege of looking out at this, this great cloud of witnesses at work. It's you who show me faith again.

It's you—I see you pulling your car into the spot just by my window, and you carry out piles of casseroles to deliver around the city. Knowing that

in a few weeks more will be needed and that this delivery alone will not solve hunger. But we're going to do something nonetheless.

It's you—going to surround a friend with hymns and fellowship when illness overwhelms a body, bringing church to that person. It's delivering flowers, or a prayer shawl. It's signing a 1000 cards, so that someone might feel seen.

It's you—in your daily lives. In your daily work and witness as you care for your neighbors in crisis, as you heal the sick, and welcome strangers, volunteer your time, care for your loved ones. Each act a visible expression of what can be rather than what is.

It's you—coming to committee meetings and choir practice, connection groups and bible studies, stepping into a classroom, knowing that someone is going to go off script, someone will arrive late, and there will always be another problem to solve. Faith is showing up again and again, seeking something greater.

It's you—present with one another in impossible moments of grief and loss, and fear. Driving to doctors appointments, being incensed on behalf of another who has been harmed, searching for the right resource when nothing else has worked, listening as bodies and minds fail, and it is sitting on these pews when we thank God for the lives of the ones we love in the

face of death. Faith is not having the right answers, but it is seeking them nonetheless.

Time would fail me to tell all the stories and lift up all the examples.

The author of Hebrews challenges us, the listeners, to remember that we stand in a long line of those who have worked and failed and tried again, and as part of that line, we are surrounded by their stories and their examples, their strength and their witness that help point us back to the original message: God did not leave us on this path alone. That's why we can lift up our eyes and look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who faced shame and pain and seeming failure to make a way for us.

But my friends, sometimes you can't see the one at the front of the race, If you can't see that far. Then look at the person beside you. The one just ahead or even the one behind you keeping pace. Look for their example, and when you can, be the example for someone else.

And if the way seems so precarious you cannot move and you cannot even see the people beside you, then instead of looking up to the heavens, look down at the path beneath your feet. Look at the mix of shapes and indents and prints of those who have made this way before; of all those who have run this race and helped to set a path that we might follow.