

INTRODUCTION

Last week we finished the Book of Acts, and I told you something that I hope stuck with you: Acts ends without a true ending. Luke simply stops writing, not because the story was finished, but because the mission of Jesus was never meant to conclude on a page. It continues through the Church, in every generation, including ours.

But that raises a harder question, and it's the question this morning's text was written to answer. If the mission keeps going long after any of us are gone — if none of us gets to see the whole story, only the chapter we're given to live — then what actually sustains a person, or a church, across a mission like that? What keeps you moving forward through a chapter you know you won't live to see the end of?

That is exactly the question the book of Hebrews was written to answer. This letter was sent to believers who were tired. Some of them were being tempted to quietly drift back to what was familiar, to give up on a promise that hadn't yet visibly arrived, to decide that the cost of continuing to believe had simply become too high. That is not a hypothetical audience. That is every congregation that has ever stood at the edge of an uncertain season — including, I believe, this one, right now.

So today we turn to one of the most beautiful chapters in all of Scripture, sometimes called the "hall of faith," and we ask what it actually means to keep believing when the promise still hasn't arrived.

Here's something worth knowing before we dive in. Unlike Paul's other letters, Hebrews never actually names its author. Scholars have debated it for centuries, and honestly, we may never know for certain this side of eternity. But many throughout church history have believed — and I count myself among them — that this letter came from the pen of Paul himself.

If that's true, I think it makes this chapter land even more powerfully. Because Paul, of all people, knew exactly what it meant to keep believing without seeing the ending. When he set out on the road to Damascus — knocked to the ground, blinded, uncertain what came next — he had no idea where that walk with God would actually lead. He didn't know it would mean shipwrecks, beatings, prison, riots, and eventually his own execution. All he knew, from that very first encounter, was that following Jesus would cost him everything he had to give — and reward him with everything heaven had to offer. That confidence, more than anything else, is what kept him going through every single trial we've watched him face this year: discouragement in Corinth, opposition in Athens, imprisonment, a violent storm at sea. It's the same thing that has kept the Church moving forward for two thousand years since — left foot in front of right foot, one generation after another, trusting a reward none of us has fully seen yet.

I. EMPOWERED BY A FAITH THAT DOESN'T REQUIRE SIGHT (vv. 1–3)

The chapter opens with as clean a definition of faith as you will find anywhere in Scripture: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." I want you to sit with that definition for a moment, because I think we often misunderstand what faith actually is. We tend to think of faith as a kind of positive feeling, or as simply believing that something is probably true. That's not what the writer of Hebrews means. Faith here is described almost like a substance — assurance, conviction — something solid enough to stand on, even though what it's standing on can't yet be seen.

Do you remember, a few weeks ago, when we talked about Paul's ship losing sight of the sun and the stars for many days, and how that darkness became the very picture of what it feels like to walk through a season without your normal points of reference? Hebrews 11 tells us that faith was never about having full visibility in the first place. Faith is what lets a person keep moving when visibility is exactly what's missing.

That reframes something important about everything we've walked through together this year. Paul in Corinth, discouraged and uncertain, trusting a harvest he couldn't yet see. The Ephesian elders, weeping on the shore at Miletus, commended into God's hands rather than a five-year plan. Two hundred and seventy-six people clinging to broken pieces of a wrecked ship, trusting a promise that had nothing to do with whether the vessel survived. Every one of those people was living Hebrews 11 before Hebrews 11 was ever written down. They simply didn't have the word for it yet. We do.

When we started Gateway of Hope, we had nine people, two hundred and fifty dollars, and a strong faith that the God who makes promises keeps them. That was it. That was the entire foundation. For thirteen years, we trusted Him to supply every need that ministry required, and He did — every single time, though rarely on a timeline that felt comfortable in the moment.

I remember, only about six weeks into that congregation's life, signing a lease committing us to three thousand dollars a month for a small space. By any reasonable measure, a church our size and our age had no business signing a commitment like that. We didn't have three thousand dollars sitting anywhere. We had nine people and a promise. And yet, month after month, for years, God provided exactly what was needed to keep that lease paid and that ministry funded. Not because we had a business plan sophisticated enough to make it work. Because we had assurance of what we hoped for and conviction about what we hadn't yet seen — and we kept showing up and trusting Him with the gap between the two.

Over the years, that rent climbed higher — eventually to forty-two hundred and fifty dollars a month — and God kept providing, every single time. Then COVID hit. For three months, we couldn't hold services at all. No gathering meant no offering, and we fell behind on rent. We were twelve thousand dollars in the hole, with absolutely no idea where that money would come from. The future of that congregation was in serious doubt. We had nothing but a promise, and we stood on it, because standing on it was the only thing left to do.

I remember the exact day an invoice arrived from our landlord. I opened it expecting to see the number we owed staring back at me. Instead, it read: "Balance: \$0. Account current." Without us ever asking, without a single conversation about it, our landlord had simply forgiven the entire past balance. Twelve thousand dollars, gone, on a piece of paper we never expected to see. That is what it looks like to have assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen — not because we manufactured the outcome ourselves, but because we kept believing long enough to still be standing there when God provided it.

II. EMPOWERED BY A FAITH THAT ACTS BEFORE IT UNDERSTANDS (vv. 8–27)

The rest of the chapter simply tells story after story of people who lived out that definition. I want to slow down on three of them this morning, because I think each one speaks directly to where we find ourselves.

The first is Abraham. Hebrews tells us that "by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." Read

that sentence again. Not knowing where he was going. Abraham didn't get a map before he left Ur. He got a call, a promise, and a command to go — and the details filled in only as he walked. That is such an accurate picture of what real faith often requires. Not certainty about the destination. Simply enough trust in the One doing the calling to take the next step without it.

The second is Sarah. Hebrews tells us that "by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." Sarah had every reasonable, rational argument for why the promise God had given her could no longer come true. Her body told her one story. God's word told her another. And Hebrews says the thing that made the difference wasn't Sarah's confidence in herself, her body, or her circumstances. It was her confidence in God's character — she considered Him faithful. That is worth sitting with for any of us, and for any church, that has ever quietly assumed a season of new life was behind them rather than ahead of them.

The third is Moses. Hebrews tells us that Moses, when he had grown up, chose "rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin," and considered "the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." Moses had every comfort Egypt could offer. He gave it up, not because comfort was evil, but because he was looking toward something Egypt's treasures could never actually give him. Faith, for Moses, meant choosing substance over the comfort of the familiar.

I felt a version of that same tension myself, more recently than Damascus Road, when St. John's first called me to be your pastor. I'll be honest with you about my first private reaction, because I think it matters that you hear it plainly: my first thought was, "No. This will never work." A hundred-and-eight-year-old church with years of decline, an aging congregation, a denomination going through its own real struggles, and some genuinely deep relational health challenges underneath it all — that is not, by any reasonable measure, a recipe for success. If anything, it looked like the opposite.

But I prayed on it. And the same peace I had felt years earlier, saying yes to help birth Gateway of Hope out of nothing, was present again. Not certainty about the outcome. Not a guarantee that it would work. Just the same quiet confidence that had carried me before. So I let my yes be yes, the way Abraham did, the way Moses did — not knowing exactly where it would lead, only trusting the One who was calling me there. And God has been faithful, every step since.

Even now, looking toward whatever tomorrow holds for this congregation, there are real questions in front of us about what comes next. I won't pretend otherwise. But faith is what will carry us into whatever God's perfect will actually is — not because we can already see it clearly, but because we have learned, across this whole journey together, exactly who He is. And a Father like that does not hand His children a stone when they ask for bread, or a snake when they ask for fish.

Notice what all three of these stories have in common. None of them begin with full understanding. Abraham didn't understand the destination. Sarah didn't understand how an old woman could bear a child. Moses didn't understand exactly what leaving Egypt would cost him or where it would lead. In every case, faith acted before it fully understood — trusting God's character enough to take the next step, and only then discovering what the next step would actually require.

III. EMPOWERED BY A FAITH THAT DOESN'T REQUIRE THE ENDING (vv. 13, 39–40)

Now we come to the verse that I believe is the real heart of this entire chapter, and the reason it matters so much for us this morning. After naming Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and others, Hebrews says this: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar."

Read that again. They died in faith. Not having received what was promised. They saw it only from a distance, the way you might see a shoreline from far out at sea — real, but not yet reached.

And then the chapter ends with a verse I think is one of the most remarkable in the whole Bible: "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

Do you see what that verse is saying? Every person in that hall of faith — every one of them commended by God Himself for their faith — did not receive the fulfillment of the promise in their own lifetime. And Hebrews says that wasn't a flaw in God's plan. It was the plan. Their story wasn't even complete without ours. God had something better in mind than any single generation seeing the whole story unfold on its own timeline.

That is exactly the theological ground under what we said last week about Acts ending without a true ending. The mission was never going to be finished by any one generation — not the apostles, not the Ephesian elders, not the Women's Guild who planted this congregation in 1915, not Beverly in her hundred years of faithfulness, not us. That was never the plan. The plan has always been a relay, not a single runner crossing the line alone.

CONCLUSION

When I read this chapter now, I realize it has actually been describing nearly everyone we've walked with together this year. Beverly, who lived a hundred years of faithfulness without needing to see how her story fit into the whole. The Women's Guild, who kept a ledger through a world war with no way of knowing what would come of it. The Ephesian elders, weeping on a shore, commended to God rather than a plan. Every one of them died — or will one day — in faith, not having received everything promised, but having seen it from a distance, and having trusted the One who could see the whole story even when they couldn't.

None of them needed to see the ending to be commended for their faith. They simply needed to keep believing.

INVITATION

So let me leave you with the question Hebrews 11 leaves for all of us. Where has God called you to go without yet knowing the whole destination? Where has your own body, your own circumstances, or your own reasonable doubts told you a promise was no longer possible — and where might God be asking you to consider Him faithful anyway? And what would it look like, this week, to choose substance over the comfort of the familiar, the way Moses did?

We don't need to see the whole story to be found faithful in it. We simply need to keep believing — trusting that whatever chapter we've been given to live is not the whole story, and that the One who began it will be faithful to finish it, in His time, in His way. So let us pray