

Today our reading comes from Hebrews 11:1-16, 32-40, 12:1-12. This passage describes faith, persecution and discipline. I will talk about how it is important to have faith when we are going hard times and troubles, and how God knows what he is doing when he allows suffering.

Hebrews 11:1-16, 32-40, 12:1-12

1Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2This is what the ancients were commended for.

3By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

4By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

5By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

7By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

8By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

13All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. 14People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

32And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched 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. 35Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to

be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

39These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Hebrews 12

1Therefore, 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, 2fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

4In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,

and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

6because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,

and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

7Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

12Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Background to the reading

- Hebrews was a letter written to the Hebrew believers in the first century AD, probably before 70AD when the temple was destroyed. We are not sure who the author is, but it was probably initially written to the church in Rome.
 - It was written to encourage Christians who were living with persecution to hold firm to their faith in Jesus, and not to return to the Jewish religion as many were being pressured to.
 - The verses that I have missed out in chapter 11 mention many of the characters in the bible and describe their acts of faith.
-
- The first 3 verses define what faith is, that it is the confidence that we have in God, even though we can't see him. We also can't see or comprehend the plans for good that he has for us and all those who love him.
 - However, we can see his great creation, a demonstration of the vastness of his power, which didn't come about from something that we can see, but from the spoken word of God.
-
- Verse 4 talks about how Able brought an offering to God, he brought the firstborn and the fattest portions of his flock. This can be found in Genesis 4:4.
 - This offering was pleasing to God because he didn't begrudge what he gave up for him, and he didn't carefully count out what was God's and what was his, he cheerfully gave God an offering based out of love for God and trust that he would continue to provide for him in the future.
 - He was commended as righteous, not because he was wealthy and gave a big gift out of his abundance, but because he gave the best bits, and first born, which would be his largest animals and probably the ones that would be more likely to be fertile for future breeding. The righteousness attributed to him was because of his faith in God's provision and his love for God.
 - Even though Able was murdered for this act of love to God, he is still remembered to this day for his faith.

- Verse 5 talks about Enoch, his story is told in Genesis 5:21-24.
 - Enoch walked faithfully with God.
 - This simple syntax explains a lot about Enoch. It shows that his life was centred around God, and that he spent time maintaining a relationship with him trusting in him.
- We cannot please God by works alone, we need to have faith in God, to believe he exists, but also that he is worth seeking.
 - When we truly believe in God, and what he has done for us. That he sacrificed his own son, Jesus, to take our just punishment that should have resulted in our death and destruction, so that we could have eternal life with him if we so choose.
 - And we start to understand the extent of his grace, mercy, kindness and love.
 - Then we realise that he is a God that is worth pursuing with all of our heart.
 - God does reward those who earnestly seek him.
- Verse 7 talks about Noah (his story can be found in Genesis Chapters 6-9).
- Noah showed faith by acting on things that he had never seen.
 - It is possible that there had never been rain on the earth at that time, but that the ground had been watered by springs and streams. And where Noah lived, there would have been no need for a boat, let alone one the size of a giant cruise ship.
 - It would have taken years to build the ark, it may have been 120 years.
 - And yet Noah faithfully continued to build the ark to God's specifications.
 - In addition to this, Noah followed God's instructions to enter the ark 7 days before the rain started.
 - We don't know if Noah ever had doubts about what God was saying, but we know that he faithfully, obediently and with reverence for God, acted on his instructions, saving himself, his family and ultimately all life on earth.
- Noah's faith in both acting with righteousness while surrounded by people behaving with great evil, and in undertaking such a great task as building the ark under God's instructions showed up the evil of the world in contrast.
 - The people of the time would have seen Noah's actions and had every chance to repent but chose not to.
- Because Noah trusted God and obeyed him he was called righteous.

- Verses 8-12 talk about Abraham, (his story can be found in Genesis 12-15.)
- God told Abraham to move away from everything that he knew, to a new country, and promised to reward him by making him into a great nation, blessing him greatly and blessing the whole world through him.
 - This promise was made when Abraham was 75 and still childless.
- Abraham set out on this long journey trusting that God would keep his promise and God blessed him with much wealth.
 - However, he had to wait for the promise of his son to be fulfilled until he was 100 years old.
- Verses 13-16 describe how these people had their eyes fixed on God and eternity. They knew that nothing this world can offer can compare to what God has in store for those who love him.
- So to briefly summarise the points made about faith so far:
 - Firstly, faith in God is trusting in the invisible to have confidence that he has the power to effect the visible world.
 - Secondly, faith is trusting God with our possessions and that he will continue provide for us (Able).
 - Thirdly, faith is walking with God on a daily basis, believing that he exists and that he will reward us for earnestly seeking him (Enoch).
 - Fourthly, faith is behaving in a righteous manner when all the world around us is committing evil; and obeying God's commands even when we don't see the final purpose (Noah).
 - Fifthly, faith is stepping out into the unknown, leaving behind family ties and the false gods of our ancestors, and trusting in God even if he isn't acting on the timetable that we expect.

Hebrews 11 Verses 32-35a

32And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched 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. 35Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

- There have been many saints in biblical times, and recent times, that have done great things through the power of God.
 - All of the amazing things that these saints have achieved have been through stepping out in faith and trusting God.
 - Not through their own power, but through God's. God used their weakness and turned it into strength when they relied on him.
 - Nonetheless, they had to act on their faith however great or small it was.

- The late Timothy Keller, had a good allegory for this.
- If we take, for example that chair, and we have 2 people, one who is terrified to sit on the chair because he thinks that it will break under him, but sits on it anyway, and one who is 100% confident that the chair will take his weight and just sits on the chair. Which of the 2 people will the chair hold up?
 - It will hold them both up, because it isn't the strength of the persons belief in the chair, but the strength of the chair itself that holds them up.
 - Nonetheless, the first person who sat in the chair would never have known that it would hold him up if he hadn't had the courage to test it with the small amount of faith that he had in it.
- Likewise, the more we trust in God and see him upholding us, the easier it will be to trust him in the future.
- In addition to this, Romans 10:17 says '*Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.*'
 - Thus the more we read the bible and learn about God and his heart for us, the more we will be able to have the faith that he only wants what is good for us. And the more of his promises that we read, the more we can trust that what he ultimately planned for us is good.

Hebrews 11: 35b-39

35b There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. 36Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

39These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

- This part of the passage describes the part of being a Christian that isn't so good. The hard times that come as a part of living in a world tainted with sin, resulting in death, decay and destruction.
 - The part where we need to exercise our faith.
 - In many parts of the world, Christians today are still being tortured and murdered for their faith.
 - But even those of us who aren't facing this kind of persecution are still facing devastating tests of our faith. Loss of loved ones, sickness, disabilities, financial problems, family disharmony, abuse and many other hardships.

- Therefore unfortunately, being a Christian doesn't insulate us from the troubles of the world.
 - Jesus explained this to his disciples, not long before he went to be crucified
 - *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*
John 16:33 NIV
- The difference between those of us who love Jesus, and those who don't know him, is that we are not alone through our troubles.
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 *3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 5For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.*
- Consequently, as we look back on the times that God has blessed, rescued or healed us, we can have hope for the future even if it feels that he is not currently answering our prayers.
 - When we remember the times when God has shown us grace and mercy, it makes it easier to trust his promise in:
 - Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*
- Furthermore, we are not citizens of this world, but only passing through, our current troubles will seem fleeting when we get to heaven.
- 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *16Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Hebrews 12:1-3

1Therefore, 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, 2fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

- As Christians we have the eyes of the world on us, witnessing how we deal with our troubles.
 - When we persevere in our faith and can focus on Jesus, we can endure great hardships with joy.
 - This can bring hope to those who don't know Jesus..
- Moreover, we serve a God who came to earth in human form and faced all the same trials and temptations that we do.
 - Jesus kept his faith in the Father, knowing all the suffering that he was going to have to endure, because to him it was worth it. His was looking to the future, to eternity.
- In addition to this, Jesus stayed focused on the plan that God had for him, he didn't let anyone swerve him from his purpose.
 - We can take heart seeing that Jesus endured all that pressure and temptation but didn't give in to it and instead showed us what a perfect faith looked like.

Hebrews 12:4-11

4In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,

and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

6because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,

and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

7Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

- If we are just skimming through the bible, or reading it in sections, it can sometimes be easy to assume that this discussion of discipline is another topic completely.
 - However, the book of Hebrews was written as a letter, the division into chapters and added headings was designed to make it easier to read and to find certain topics.
 - Thus, we can sometimes miss that the author of this letter didn't put the topic headings in, and this discussion of faith actually flows into talking about discipline.
- Therefore, if we look at the hardships that we endure as a form of discipline, we know that God is allowing it out of love.
 - *Romans 8:20-21 20For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*
 - We discipline children in the hope that they will grow up in the right way with good character
 - Likewise, God disciplines us to correct the deficiencies in our characters so that we have every opportunity to change and have a wonderful eternity with God and everyone else who loves Jesus.
 - *James 1:2-4 2Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*
- Moreover, we know that God does not discipline us out of condemnation, but to draw us to him, and to give us hope.
 - *Romans 5:3-5 3Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*
- Personally, when I look back on the times of greatest suffering in my life, although I don't want to ever have to endure these again, I know that they have produced fruit in my life.
 - They have improved my relationship with God, my understanding of his love towards me, and my ability to empathise with and comfort others.
 - They have helped me to repent of sins that I might never have realised were an issue if I hadn't had this discipline in my life.
 - They have taught me to have a faith in God that even bad things happen for a reason, even if I can't see it at the time.
 - I now know that whatever the future brings, God will not leave me to go through it alone, so I do not need to be afraid. And even if my strength isn't enough, his is.

Finally, Hebrews 12:12-13 *Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13“Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

- These verses are a quote from Isaiah 35: 3 and Proverbs 4:26
- They are an encouragement to take heart, strengthen your resolve, and stay on the right path, so that instead of being disabled by fear, you will be able to be strengthened by faith.
- It is a call to maintain faith in hard times, to trust in God to strengthen us.
- 1 Peter 10:6-7 *6Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 7Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

In conclusion

- Faith is trusting that the God who we cannot see is willing and able to work in our lives in a way that we can see.
 - That he loves us and wants what is best for us, even if we can’t see his hand in our circumstances.
 - It is earnestly seeking him, obeying him and following him.
- Bad things will happen in this life, as we all know.
 - Sometimes we will be rescued through miraculous means.
 - However, sometimes we won’t be, and may not see a relief from our suffering until we get to heaven.
 - God’s allows us to go through suffering as a form of discipline, to build our character and prepare us for eternity.
 - We will not always understand why God allows certain things, but we can ask him to show us the lessons that we need to learn through our suffering.
- The more we exercise our faith in God, the more it will grow, and the easier it will be to endure hard times knowing that we can trust God who organises all things to work together for the good of those who love him and will be with us every step of the way.