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## Unfathomable Faith: Trusting the Mysterious Nature of God in Times of Uncertainty

Hebrews 11:29-30

August 26, 2018, Derek Bird

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### **Confession: Walking with God Through the Valley**

Last year during a time of devotion God revealed to me my position in proximity to him, and it's shifted greatly in the last few years. In the quietness of my heart he asked that whenever I share his word that I begin with this. So I do so not because I enjoy speaking about myself or because I desire to lay myself bare before you. I do this out of obedience. For the first time I preached in a church in my early 20s until my early 40s I spoke from a position of raw idealism. "This is the best way...not because I've experienced it but because this is what God says is the best way..." As an analogy, I spoke from the position of a soon to be parent who's never had kids. It's a position where you're batting a 1000. You have all the answers and you're ready to tackle all the challenges of parenthood. Then you have kids, and you realize the element of "oh, no, the books didn't prepare me for the sensory overload of the first diaper change" and "oh, no, I'm supposed to teach teens the intricacies of a Shakespeare text on multiple nights of four hours of broken sleep" and "oh, no, none of the books prepared my wife and I for what we we're supposed to do when you have an appointment at 9:00am and the youngster opens his sippy cup at 8:45am and dumps grape juice all over the light grey carpet in the place you're renting."

That's where I live now. I'm now speaking from a position of the haggard parent, who's been in the trenches, who knows the joy and the pain, who knows the sleepless nights, who knows the tears and the stress, who knows that he'd never exchange this time for all the money in the world. That's my position of faith. Through God's grace I'm a survivor. And I know there's victory in Christ, and I can now live in his victory. That's the place I speak from. It's a place of brokenness and not idealism. I believe this is a place of deep faith, because I know that no matter how well I prepare there are always variables that are out of my control—and though I don't always like it, I walk with Christ along this path. I know now that Christ meets me in my brokenness and my insufficiencies. He's promised that—that though I may not have all the answers that he will always be enough. This has become foundational to deepening my faith.

**And oddly enough, this is what our core summer passage Hebrews 11 is all about. It's about the battle tested.** Those who've fought in the trenches, those who've won and

lost battles, those who've metaphorically shot game winning baskets and who've also taken the shot and missed.

And you'll note that none of the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 are fans. None of them are bystanders. They were all actively engaged in life. Actively engaged in all the challenges life has to offer. They actively engaged God in all aspects of their lives. And when we're actively engaged, we're going to mess up sometimes. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German pastor, teacher, theologian) those who walk in God's grace realized that "Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will."

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab...these are the warriors on the field. They are the go-to players for the last shot. They are the ones who are criticized by fans for missing the game winners one year and then lauded by fans for making it the next. These are the ones who are drenched in sweat, who suffer injuries, and who fall and get back up. They are the ones who the writer of Hebrews holds up and says, "They did it; so can you".

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**Main Point—As we actively pursue God and his will, we develop an unfathomable faith in him because we see him at work in every circumstance; whereas, if we allow our human nature to take control, our faith becomes stagnant and eventually we become fully reliant on self.**

***Point #1—The passage (Hebrews 11) is held together by the push toward perseverance (and perseverance and endurance indicate momentum of some sort)***

First, let's define momentum—movement does not necessarily mean picking up from here and starting over somewhere else (though it might mean that). Momentum is defined as listening to God's voice and trusting him to move in that direction. For some of you who were dragged out to church today by a relative or neighbor, momentum might mean breaking through some of your preconceived notions, stereotypes or hurt. For those who've been sitting in pews for a lifetime it might mean getting out of the Believers Spa (the place of comfort) and listening to his voice (rather than telling God what you're going to accomplish for him). It might mean dealing with a deep hurt you're been avoiding. It might mean repairing a fractured relationship. It might mean providing a meal for someone in need. It might mean making a meal for a neighbor who's just lost a spouse or gone through a divorce. That's momentum. That's movement. It's listening to his quiet voice and trusting God in uncomfortable situations.

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*Hebrews 10:36 and 39 “<sup>36</sup>Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.*

...<sup>39</sup> But we are not like those who turn away from God to their own destruction. We are the faithful ones, whose souls will be saved.”

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*Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. <sup>2</sup> We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.*

*[a] Because of the joy<sup>[b]</sup> awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.”*

(Perseverance and endurance indicate we must push through something difficult or challenging—and following God by faith can be extremely uncomfortable because in doing so we're required to step off into the unknown and trust that he fully knows what is unknown to us)

The word persevere (endure) shows up in 10:35 and 12:1—In a way the words are bookends calling those of faith to endure the trials of life (and not just to endure life but to maintain a life of faith while doing so). Persevere from Latin *serverus* and means *severe*. Endure also comes from Latin and means *hard*. God is calling us to trust him through the discomfort and the challenges of life. Not only that, he's calling us to trust him, to have faith in him when he's called us to move in the direction he's called us to go, whether the direction is clear or ambiguous. We can endure and persevere through these times because he knows the beginning from the end.

Our human nature also calls us in a direction, and it is a direction of faith in self, or self reliance. The paradox of moving in this direction is that our initial steps are firm and land firmly. Though our initial steps land firmly, in the long run we feel lost and like we missed a fork in the road somewhere along the way. Only when we walk with Christ and rely on our faith in him do we get to see what he's fully destined us to become—his children.

This makes sense in the way that we are easily deterred from the path because of ourselves (our own human nature / temptations / fear of the unknown / the comfort of what's known / distrust that God will always rescue and heal us...)

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*Illustration-- Happening upon a stranded lady on the way down from Fisher Peak. The lady was 40 meters from the top and stopped. Her group had left her and there was one tricky portion of the hike right before the last pitch. She sat there paralyzed by fear. She couldn't move. So my friend and I sat with her and*

talked until she was calm again. Then we told her how close she was to the top where the rest of her group was and we helped her up this section. She had to get to a point where she overcame her fear and trusted us enough to help her.

*Also, I see it here all the time as well on the suspension bridge. People will walk to a point...right to the edge below them and then stop...fear won't let them pass a certain point.*

This is what Hebrews 11 is all about. It's about taking trusting those who've gone before. It's about trusting Christ rather than trusting self. And what that looks like is meeting together regularly so that we can encourage one another, and being encouraged by those of faith who have run the race. It means denying self daily so that we can listen to the directions God provides for us about the direction he'd have us go with him.

Our default in the fallen world is to become self reliant. This is the opposite of faith in God. But our faith in him requires us to trust him and trust others who've gone before us in the faith.

Self reliance is an illusion however. We live a façade, a lie of darkness when we believe that we can do it ourselves. *(Short illustration if time permits. Chris Knight the hermit from Maine. At 20 years old he left society to live in the woods, and he lived alone for 27 years undiscovered. The problem was that over those 27 years he committed over 1000 crimes. He broke into neighboring cabins to steal supplies)*

## **Moving from comfort and self reliance to a life of faith**

### **Passage Focus: Hebrews 11:29-30**

<sup>29</sup> It was by faith that the people of Israel went right through the Red Sea as though they were on dry ground. But when the Egyptians tried to follow, they were all drowned.

<sup>30</sup> It was by faith that the people of Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and the walls came crashing down.

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***Point #2 Just because we're moving along God's path doesn't mean that life is easy (remember we must persevere and endure)***

We see this in both passages Exodus 14 (15) and in Joshua 6. Even though God requires they go in a direction, there are still many challenges that need to be overcome. He doesn't say, "Go in this direction and I'll remove all the challenges for you. I'll make sure that I take out all the areas where you'll experience fear or anxiety. When Moses leads the people out of Egypt, they become hemmed in. They've got nowhere to go. No obvious

solution presents itself. Moses calls out to God on behalf of the people and God provides Moses with a plan. It's not the obvious plan, but it's a plan. The same happens when Joshua is leading the people when they face their first obstacle as they begin their movement into the promise land. God provides Joshua with a plan (an odd plan).

When he provides a way, we still have to step in the direction he's provided. We have to constantly fight the Tommy Lee Jones voice (explain) in our heads and go in the direction God provides rather than the direction we think is most comfortable.

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***Point #3 All challenges will force us in one of two directions. One, away from God and toward self reliance. And two, toward God and a deeper faith in him.***

Human nature, regardless of our faith, will still remain with us. Regardless of what we've seen God do, we still must be diligent in keeping our focus on him. In both stories, we see evidence of those who do not trust God and his provisions or boundaries. Despite God at work through the pillar of fire and cloud, and the miraculous works he does we often have a short term faith memory. Even after the people see Moses part the waters they complain when they get to the other side. They also complained when they were on the same side as the Egyptians even though God protected them at that point as well. With Joshua and Jericho, we see that God provides the people with very strict instructions on what they should and shouldn't do and a guy named Achan in the tribe of Judah is the first to go against what God outlines by taking things that he should not take (a Babylonian bathrobe of all things) from Jericho.

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***Point #4 Trusting God's plan fosters a belief in the mystery of God. Whereas self reliance fosters pride and blindness to the spiritual reality of the situation.***

Look at both of these stories. God acts in miraculous ways to save his people. When the people are leaving Egypt, God show up as a pillar of cloud and fire. Moses, worried about leading the people to a place where they are going to get destroyed calls on God and he provides an answer. Reach out and strike the water and the seas will part and you'll be able to pass on dry ground. He does so and God does what he says he's going to do. If you'd like to check out the story make sure you read both Exodus 14 and Exodus 15. Exodus 14 tells the story and Exodus 15 tells the story in poetry, adding another layer of mystery to the power of God. One of my favorite descriptions is when the poet explains how God piled up the waters, "With the blast of your nostrils, the waters piled up." Growing up on a farm, I've seen some pretty powerful nostrils displayed by what's known as the farmer's blow, but nothing like this.

We see this in their first conquest as they move into the promise land as well. God operates in a way that they know it is God at work. Marching around city walls for seven

days and on the seventh day marching around seven times and then yelling and blasting trumpets.

We can make it through life on our own strength, and often we do. But God calls us to learn to rely on him. This is faith—fully relying on that which we cannot see to act in a way where we can have no doubt that he exists.

And I believe this is a true test of where we are at in our faith—the mysterious nature of God. As we get older we tend to do more and see more. Human nature drives us to rely on ourselves more and rely on God less.

Has God become predictable? If he has then there's a good chance you're serving a God you've created. Certain characteristics of God are understandable but he's anything but predictable. Even in the attributes of God we rely on (his love, his grace, his forgiveness...) if these are predictable then again they come from a disingenuous place. These attributes of God are consistently overwhelming if anything, but not predictable. For a life of faith requires us to either be walking (metaphorically) on water toward Christ or walking through the Red Sea on dry ground. The lyrics from the worship song "Oceans" say it this way: "You call me out upon the waters / The great unknown where feet may fail / And there I find You in the mystery / In oceans deep / My faith will stand." We experience the mystery of God when we walk by faith.

## Conclusion:

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A great paradox exists as we walk along the path Christ chooses for us: our faith deepens but it does not become more complex. In fact as our faith in God increases it becomes simpler and more trusting (the faith of a child who trusts a parent / It doesn't need to be proven because it's just there because of the love that exists between child and parent)

*Illustration:* When I think of this type of faith, I'm reminded of my friend Jesse who as a parent of a young child was sitting with him watching an Easter special on TV. They watched one of the crucifixion stories and as they watched, Jesse looked over and his son was crying and it was well before the actual crucifixion. Jesse asked what was wrong and his son replied: "When I asked Jesus into my heart, you told me that he would always be with me. But he's not here (and he pointed to his chest), he's there (and he pointed to the TV).

This story illustrates a memorable point about our faith. We have to always be aware. We must meet Christ daily at the cross so we can toss the burden of our human nature (the desire accomplish life alone) at his feet. We must be as sensitive as Jesse's son in order to be intentional about our faith walk.

And what Hebrews 11 is pushing toward is Christ himself. He provides us with an example of one who's lived the challenges, who went to the cross because of his father's will, and who now is seated with his father in heaven. He is the true champion of faith. He is the foundation of our faith.

This is true for everyone present today. For those who've never met Christ at the cross, if you feel the need to do that today, this is the faith path I'm speaking of, the one that's put before you that requires a step, and if you feel the need to take that step then there will be people at the front here today to help you with that.

For those who've sat in the pews for years but have become metaphorically too comfortable in that pew, take a step to make your faith come alive again. And the only way to do that is to step away from the self reliant faith to a place of God centered faith, which requires us to consistently move toward his voice and his leading.

### *[10]*

I'd like to end with a quote by the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr where he puts our need for faith in God into perspective.

=He says—"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith.

### *[11]*

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

Bible Version Cited:

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