

Having the Faith to Follow God

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I think as we all know that as New Covenant Christians, we are called to come out of the world we're living in. To give it a physical analogy, we're called to be salmon swimming upstream. In other words, the culture and the world around us are all flowing in one direction and we're called to be oddballs. We're called to buck that and go a completely different way, to follow God, and fight the current you might say. Where all the force of energy is coming at you and you have to willfully decide to go in the opposite direction. To be a loner and go it alone, following God in spite all of the pressures in the world around us that are trying to pull us in the opposite direction. That's inherent to being a New Covenant Christian and something we're all relatively familiar with.

If we look at the history of God's people—even going back to Ancient Israel and their physical relationship with God—all the way to the New Covenant church, mankind unfortunately has a very consistent track record of wanting to follow the herd. Of wanting to follow a particular man or leader, to follow a group and go along with the herd of the people that they are in—in whatever direction that is—rather than following God. What we'll see throughout this sermon is that this has a consistent track record of getting man into trouble. Getting us off in the wrong direction because our inherent physical nature is to follow men or the crowd around us rather than choosing to follow God and to be independent in following Him.

One of the reasons for that is, it requires faith to follow God. This is one of the reasons why the Bible tells us that *the just must live by faith*. Without faith it's impossible to please God. We have to have that faith in believing and following Him in spite of all the natural, physical pulls around us. We have to be that salmon swimming upstream, fighting against the current which is the opposite our human nature.

We want to look at this particular subject because it's something inherently important to us as New Covenant Christians. We have to be willing to go it alone and fight the natural current of the stream. If you would like a title for this sermon, it's:

Having the Faith to Follow God

As we're going to see, our natural tendency as physical human beings is to follow the culture around us, to follow the herd, to follow a particular leader—to do anything but follow God. That is our natural tendency. Let's start off taking a brief look at the definition of faith. We'll go to where you expect to go—Hebrews 11. We'll see the statement, to follow and believe God, we simply have to have faith. It's a fundamental requirement that we can't do without. We'll see, even the very definition of faith is against how our physical minds tend to work. We tend to grasp onto what we can physically relate to in our physical world. What we can see, what we can perceive with

our physical senses, what makes sense to our physical minds and faith is the exact opposite of all that.

Hebrews 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

2) *For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.*

3) *By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. (NKJV)*

Again, our world is such, that we tend to go along with our empirical senses—what we can see, feel, and what makes sense to our physical minds—and faith is completely outside of that. Skip down to verse 6.

6) *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (NKJV)*

In other words, we must have a complete faith and trust in God that He is going to take care of us, regardless of what our physical senses are telling us. Regardless of the physical circumstances we are facing in our world, we have to depend and rely upon God. We have to be that salmon swimming upstream. We have to be going against the current and the direction where the herd is wanting to go. We have to think individually and to want to follow Him in spite of all that. If you look at the history of God's people, going back to the beginning with Ancient Israel, to all throughout the New Covenant church, what we'll find is, that unfortunately this human tendency of human beings who would rather follow a strong physical leader—or follow the group they are in, rather than follow God. This goes all the way back to Mount Sinai. It's the tendency of mankind throughout our entire history.

In Exodus 20, we'll see the account at Mount Sinai where God is delivering the commandments there, to make a covenant with Ancient Israel. I think it's interesting to see up to this point, by the time they have gotten to this point—to Mount Sinai—they've already experienced all the plagues upon the Egyptians, they've seen the Red Sea parted, they're now being fed by food that falls from the sky six days a week, they are seeing a lot of evidence of this supernatural God Who is working with them. They also get the advantage of something that we don't get today. Today, when we communicate with God, we pray to Him, we talk directly to Him, but we don't hear a voice talking back to us. We have to study His word and He inspires our thoughts, but we don't get the benefit of a conversation where you actually hear God speaking and telling you His will. They actually got to hear God's voice and they didn't want to hear it. Notice in Exodus 20:18, this is after He has thundered out the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai.

Exodus 20:18 *Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off.*

19) *Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die."*

20) *And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin."*

21) *So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was. (NKJV)*

How many times in our lives have we been through a difficult situation and we say,

"I wish God would just come and tell me His will. I would just Hear a voice and He would just tell me exactly what to do."

I'm sure you've thought that at some point in your life—I certainly have. They literally have the Creator God directly speaking and they get to hear His voice, telling them what they should do and they say,

"That's too scary; we don't want to hear directly from God, we would just rather follow a man. Moses, you just tell us what God wants and we'll just follow you because dealing directly with God, that's too scary and uncomfortable—we would just rather follow a physical man."

That has been the history of mankind from Mount Sinai to today. Even in the modern-day church of God, more often than not, people want to follow a man. They want a man to tell them what to do—their group to tell them exactly how they should behave and not have a personal relationship with God. That has been a weakness of mankind from the very beginning and always gets us into trouble. Notice what happens even after they make this covenant. They have experienced all these miracles—the Red Sea parted, they have experienced all the plagues upon the Egyptians, seen all this supernatural intervention, food is falling from the sky six days a week. Every time they eat, they are witnessing the miracle that God is present and taking care of them. But what happens when their physical leader is gone longer than they expected him to be. They immediately lose faith because they're looking to a physical man, they're not looking to God. We can see this in Exodus 32—this is the famous golden calf incident, but notice what happens here. I think it's important to remember that even though Moses disappears longer than they are expecting him to be gone, food is still falling from the sky six days a week. If they are just paying attention to what is going on around them, God hasn't gone anywhere. But notice their reaction.

Exodus 32:1 *Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (NKJV)*

They watched the Red Sea being parted; they had seen all these supernatural miracles. Moses wasn't the voice thundering from the mountain. Moses wasn't the guy who said,

“No, we don’t want to hear the voice from the mountain—you just talk to God and just tell us.”

They are looking to a man; they are following a man. God isn’t even in their thought process.

2) And Aaron said to them, “Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

3) So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

4) And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

5) So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD.” (NKJV)

They immediately went back into idolatry. But notice also what Aaron is doing. He goes along with it too, but he’s trying to put a good face on it. He makes up a fake holy day now. “We’re going to have a Feast unto Yehovah”, even though he knows the calf is not Yehovah. This is an image that they just were told a few chapters ago, specifically not to do; to make images and to bow down before them. Their whole focus is not seeing God. They are just wanting to follow a man, follow a culture around them and God is not really in the picture. This has been the history of mankind from this point, all the way forward. You’ll see this throughout the history of Ancient Israel. As a general rule, they have had a long history of always going astray and rebelling. You’ll see a general trend. When they had a strong leader, who was trying to lead them in the right direction towards God, they would generally behavior for a while. Then, if that leader died or went astray, very quickly afterward they all abandoned that and then went astray and after other gods. The absence of a strong leader or just having an evil leader, they always end up following the direction of where their leader is and where their culture is. As a result of this, they’re not following God, they are following a man. They are following the culture around them, following the herd. It’s not an issue of having the faith in God and being willing to stay faithful to Him in spite of what’s going on around them. If you look at the book of Judges, we’ll see this summarized.

Judges 2:7 *So the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD which He had done for Israel.*

8) Now Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died when he was one hundred and ten years old.

9) And they buried him within the border of his inheritance at Timnath-heres, in the mountains of Ephraim, on the north side of Mount Gaash.

10) When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.

11) *Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals;*

12) *and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger.*

13) *They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.*

14) *And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.*

15) *Wherever they went out, the hand of the LORD was against them for calamity, as the LORD had said, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.*

16) *Nevertheless, the LORD raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them.*

17) *Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so.*

18) *And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them.*

19) *And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way. (NKJV)*

Notice again that trend—when they had a righteous leader trying to lead them in the right direction, they typically would behave for a while. But what would happen was, as soon as that leader was removed from their lives, they immediately started going after other gods, abandoning everything they had believed in. They're not through faith having a relationship with God, they are just playing "Follow the leader" — That game you play as children. You follow the leader and do what Simon says—that's basically what they're doing. They just follow along with a strong leader or the culture around them and when the peer pressure is going in a positive direction, they go along with the herd in that direction. Then when the peer pressure turns negative, they follow along with that. They are like herd animals, not really having that character to follow God and be a salmon swimming upstream. They don't have the character to endure and obey Him regardless of what is taking place around them. That is having a personal relationship with God and that's not what is happening. These people are just doing the typical human thing of following the crowd and the leader.

20) *Then the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He said, "Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers, and has not heeded My voice,*

- 21) *I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died,*
 22) *so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the LORD, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.”*
 23) *Therefore the LORD left those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua. (NKJV)*

You can see, He purposely allowed them these situations to test them—to test their character. He does the same thing with us. He allows tests and trials in our lives; difficult situations for us to face, because He wants to test our loyalty. Just look back in the history of the church of God in our lifetime. I know when I was a teenager, we were all in one big organization and you had this perception that it's one big happy family and we're all moving along and you think everybody is on the same page. What happened? The primary leader died and the people who came along to run the organization after that, pretty much abandoned everything the church believed in. Over time, what you saw was the majority of the church basically walking away from what all these people said they believed in for all of their lives. For decades, people had gone along, saying they sincerely believed these things, would follow this for the rest of their lives but as soon as their leader and the organization—the peer pressure around them—started going in a different direction, what did they do? Followed the herd; went along following a man. That doesn't work for us as Christians. We have to have a direct relationship with God. We have to remember that God allows these things to happen to test us. To try our character and see if we really have a relationship with Him or are we just being herd animals, going along following the crowd, doing what everybody else is doing and what is comfortable. Sometimes He has to stir things up to test and try us and see what we are made of and what we are going to do.

Continuing now in chapter 3.

- Judges 3:1** *Now these are the nations which the LORD left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan*
 2) *(this was only so that the generations of the children of Israel might be taught to know war, at least those who had not formerly known it),*
 3) *namely, five lords of the Philistines, all the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites who dwelt in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal Hermon to the entrance of Hamath.*
 4) *And they were left, that He might test Israel by them, to know whether they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.*
 5) *Thus the children of Israel dwelt among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.*
 6) *And they took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods. (NKJV)*

He purposely allowed these situations to test their character, to see if they were going to follow along with anything that they agreed to. They made a covenant with God that

they will faithfully obey Him and follow His commandments, for the blessings they would receive. Typical of human nature, they wanted to receive the blessings—the nice land to live in, all the good weather and all the nice physical blessings—but faithfully obeying, they didn't really want to stick with that. What did they do? They typically just wanted to go along with whatever felt good today—whatever is comfortable, kind of go along with the herd and fitting in with the crowd, because that is human nature. What we tend to do is follow the leader or the peer pressure around us and what the group is doing, rather than saying,

“No, I personally made a commitment to follow God and if that means I have to stand alone and do it by myself, then that's what I'll do. Because that is the covenant I made.”

That's when we have to remember, that when we all made a covenant with God, we promised that we would faithfully obey regardless of what everyone else does. We have to be willing to do that. Later in this sermon, we will look at examples of some of the faithful servants of God who had to do that.

Realize, this history of wanting to follow the leader, of following a man—or what your group is doing—wasn't just something that Ancient Israel fell into. It's very understandable to look back, if you understand the subject of faith, as to why Ancient Israel would have this proclivity for always going astray and following the herd—not individually following God—because a fundamental key that we read when we started this sermon in Hebrews 11, is that faith is the fundamental component to being able to follow God. This was a people who didn't have access to the Holy Spirit—the ability of faith, through the Holy Spirit, to do that. In a sense, they were set up to fail. They are fighting a spiritual battle, they have the pull of Satan against them, they don't have the spiritual armor to be able to fight that battle. So, they kind of “brought a knife to a gun fight” and we should expect them to lose.

We have to realize that the New Covenant church had some of these proclivities as well—of wanting to follow a man and not follow God and have a relationship. In 1 Corinthians we see Paul addressing this with the Corinthian church. As we can see, he's addressing some of the symptoms of this problem, but it gets down to the heart of the same issue. As we saw with Ancient Israel, their proclivity was, if they had a good leader then they would look to that leader and they would behave for a while, if the leader was leading them in the right direction. If they had an evil leader or had a lack of good leadership, then they would immediately go astray. We even saw that they were following Moses at Mount Sinai and then Moses was gone for a little while and they immediately forgot about God. Their whole focus was, “We don't know what happened to Moses so now we need to make idols”. Even though food was still falling from the sky, six days a week. There's still evidence that the God they have made a Covenant with hasn't gone anywhere; He's still there and being faithful, but they're not focused on that. What we will see here is one of the things Paul is chastising the Corinthian church for—they're fighting over their physical leaders. They are fighting over who is the most righteous based upon who their physical leader was. The whole point he is trying to get

them to see is, you have lost God in the whole picture. You didn't get baptized in the name of these physical leaders. This is about God and Christ and you should be focused on Them. If you were focused on Them, these squabbles you have about who your leader is, wouldn't even be your focus.

1 Corinthians 1:10 *Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

11) *For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you.*

12) *Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."*

13) *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

14) *I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,*

15) *lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.*

16) *Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.*

17) *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (NKJV)*

Notice he's pointing out to them, the squabbles you have going on as to who is greater, is all about physical men. If you put it into a modern-day context, today we don't argue about Paul or Peter or Apollos, instead we put in church of God organizational names. It's the same argument though. It comes from the same carnal mindset of, "God only works through this group" or "We're the best group; our group is better than that group" and it's the same squabble. The focus is on physical men and physical organizations and God isn't even in the picture. He addresses this again in 1 Corinthians 3:1.

1 Corinthians 3:1 *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*

2) *I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*

3) *for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?*

4) *For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? (NKJV)*

What is interesting to me about this is, if you listen to some of those who get into these squabbles in the modern-day churches of God, the way it will play out is, it won't be individual names, it will be "God only works through this particular group". If you ask, why is that? "We are the spiritual giants, we are the tip of the spear, or we are the Philadelphians and everybody else are the Laodiceans—we're the most righteous". The humorous part of all this, if you take note of what Paul is saying, by virtue of the fact that one is making that argument, immediately disqualifies them of being this spiritual giant.

The argument is always, “We’re the most-godly, we’re the group most led by the Spirit” and Paul says, if you were really led by the Spirit, you wouldn’t even be making this argument. You wouldn’t be so carnal to even be engaging in this. If your mind was truly on God and Christ, and the fruits of the Spirit, you wouldn’t be going down this road at all. As he goes on to explain in the rest of this chapter, which we are about to read, he is pointing out that God isn’t even in the picture. You’ve totally missed the picture of what He is doing because you are focused on men and organizations and not on God.

- 5) *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?*
- 6) *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*
- 7) *So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*
- 8) *Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*
- 9) *For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building.*
- 10) *According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.*
- 11) *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*
- 12) *Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,*
- 13) *each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.*
- 14) *If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward.*
- 15) *If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*
- 16) *Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*
- 17) *If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. (NKJV)*

Notice how he talks about how fire will prove what is enduring and what is not. He’s talking about being tried by fire; being put in very difficult situations where it’s painful, it’s difficult and we have to strive to endure through it all because it hurts. It tests our character. That proves who is really following God. It’s easy, just like when I mentioned growing up in church, we felt like we were one big happy family and all in this one big organization and think everybody is on the same page, you have structure around you, have all your friends—the local Y.O.U. group—and all these activities going on and you are a part of this culture. You think everybody is on the same page. Then later everything changed and this all busts apart. The culture that you’re used to following then totally abandons everything you believed in. Then we start seeing who sincerely believed what we all professed to believe and who was just going along with the herd; going along with the crowd. What did we see over time? The majority of people walked away from everything they believed in. They wound up back in Protestant churches or

just gave up on the concept of following God entirely. This is after decades of living what they said they believed. Then you realize, it sounds like they had a relationship the culture of an organization, the peer pressure, the structure around them and their social group, rather than they had with God. If we really have a relationship with God, you can take away the social structure, you can take away your strong leader and all of that and we still look to God. We will still want to obey and still want to follow God, even when it's painful, even if we are all by ourselves. Even if it's just us and God and we have to forge ahead and survive through that, we'll be willing to do that if we are really looking to God. It's our inherent nature of responding to peer pressure. If the peer pressure is going in a positive direction and everybody is seeming to want to obey God, that's the popular thing to do, then we'll be part of the herd and play along. If the peer pressure is going in the other way, it tends to have the opposite effect.

This happened in Christ's time. There were people who knew He was the Messiah, who clearly understood. It wasn't like they were deceived or confused and didn't know what the truth was, they knew He was the Messiah but they would have been unpopular and ostracized by their social group if they professed the group. It became a salvational issue. Notice John 12:42.

John 12:42 *Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue;*

43) for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. (NKJV)

You can see what was important to them. They understand the truth; this is telling us they understood who Christ was. They know He is the promised Messiah and they are not confused about that. But they know that if they profess this and act accordingly, they are going to quickly become unpopular and it's going to become painful. They are not willing to face the pain or willing to strike out on their own and be the salmon swimming upstream and face the social pressures, the ostracization that comes from following what they know is correct. They don't want to face that kind of pain; they want to fit in and be a herd animal and go along with the crowd. That is just inherent to our carnal human nature. But to be faithful Christians, we have to be willing to go against that. We have to realize, as Christians we have to be willing to forsake our social crowd. If it comes down to a clear question between following God and fitting in with a crowd around us, or hanging onto the favor of people we care about versus God, we have to pick God over everyone else in our lives. This is a fundamental thing we had to look at before we even got baptized. If you got proper baptismal counseling, I'm sure you went over Luke 14. Let's turn to Luke 14 and we'll see it directly tells us that we have to be willing to place God above everything else in our lives. That can mean being a salmon having to swim upstream. Go against everything else in our lives and that maybe being ostracized, being kicked out of the synagogue as we just read in John 12. If that's what it means, that is what we have to be willing to face.

Luke 14:25 *Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,*

- 26) *"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.*
- 27) *And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.*
- 28) *For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—*
- 29) *lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,*
- 30) *saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'?*
- 31) *Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?*
- 32) *Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.*
- 33) *So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (NKJV)*

We can see a fundamental requirement to be a New Covenant Christian. We have to be willing to strike out on our own, to be independent if that's what is required. Not to just go along with the herd. Not just follow a particular leader, be a part of a particular group, but do what we know is right and studied in our own Bible. If that means being unpopular, if that means being ostracized, then that's the cross we have to bear. That's what is required of us as Christians. This is why faith is so important. It takes faith and that trust and reliance on God to endure through this. That can become very painful. In Hebrews 10:32 take note of the fact that the verses we are about to read are what lead into Hebrews 11, which we think of as the "Faith Chapter". It's also what I like to call the spiritual hall of fame because it mentions the great heroes of faith, that faithfully followed God. Notice the verses that lead up to addressing that subject.

Hebrews 10:32 *But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings:*

33) *partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated;*

34) *for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.*

35) *Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.*

36) *For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: (NKJV)*

We receive the promise after we have successfully endured through the pain and successfully suffered through it.

37) *"For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.*

38) *Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.*”

39) *But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (NKJV)*

Notice the just have to *live by faith*. It requires that faith and that trust in God, relying upon Him for His strength, to successfully endure and make it through all the pain and the tests and trials that we go through. He talks about those who draw back to their perdition, to their destruction. Think about all the people you have known throughout your Christian life who came into the church, who seemed to be faithfully going along for maybe even decades and then later just abandon everything that they believed in, turned their backs on it all and now are not even attempting to follow anything that they said they believed in. They made a covenant with God, with the ultimate promise of being in the Kingdom of God, said they would endure to the end to receive it, but what happened before they got to the end? They lost faith, they drew back and lost out.

We can see an example of this with Ancient Israel. Fortunately, in their case, they just lost the physical Promised Land and not their salvation. But we can learn a great lesson from this. Turn to Numbers 13. This is where the Israelites get all the way up to the Promised Land and they decide, kind of like any military invasion, you do some reconnaissance first and see what you're about to take on. I think it's important to realize in this case, that God had already promised them an outcome. We can be in situations in our Christian life where it's something where we would like something in particular to work out for us, but we don't always know what God's will is. There are a lot of times and situations where we may go into something and don't know exactly how it's going to end. In their case, God promised them *if you faithfully follow Me, I'm going to give you this land. You're going to be able to defeat your enemies, it's all going to work out*—they are told they are going to have a positive outcome. It's not even a question of wondering what the outcome is going to be. It's just simply trusting in God to bring it about.

Notice what happens here. In spite of all the miracles they experienced—the Sea being parted, they watched the plagues on the Egyptians—and remember at this point, food is falling from the sky six days a week. Every day they ate they were witnessing supernatural miracles that God was taking care of them. Notice their whole focus is on what is physically around them and there is no trust or faith in God. What do they do? They draw back. They made a covenant with God and what is their reward? In their case it's a physical covenant and inheriting the Promised Land and having a great physical life. That is the reward for them. Instead of charging forward with faith in God, to receive that, they draw back and lose it.

Numbers 13:21 *So they went up and spied out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, near the entrance of Hamath.*

22) *And they went up through the South and came to Hebron; Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the descendants of Anak, were there. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)*

23) *Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs.*

24) *The place was called the Valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the men of Israel cut down there.*

25) *And they returned from spying out the land after forty days.*

26) *Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land.*

27) *Then they told him, and said: "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.*

28) *Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there.*

29) *The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan."*

30) *Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." (NKJV)*

Caleb is looking to God. He knows that God has already promised them an outcome. He already said if you faithfully obey and do what I tell you to, I'm going to deliver it into your hands. Caleb is thinking with faith, but everyone else is thinking with their physical perceptions.

31) *But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we."*

32) *And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature.*

33) *There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." (NKJV)*

Numbers 14:1 *So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.*

2) *And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness!*

3) *Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?"*

4) *So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." (NKJV)*

Notice God is not even in the picture. Their whole focus is upon the physical obstacles that are there and all they can perceive with their eyes. There is no faith in God, in spite of all the incredible miracles that they had witnessed. Every time they eat, they are eating food that is falling from the sky. There is evidence every single day that God is there to take care of them. They are not focused on God; they are focused on everything physical around them.

5) Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

6) But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes;

7) and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land.

8) If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey.'

9) Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them."

10) And all the congregation said to stone them with stones. (NKJV)

You can see the whole focus of the people, it's all upon the physical and what are they doing? They are drawing back from the covenant they made. They made a covenant with God that they would faithfully obey Him and follow His instructions and He would give them the Promised Land. They have lost their reward now because they don't have faith in Him and they have drawn back rather than faithfully following God. We can do the same thing in our spiritual lives. We have a lot more at stake. For us, it's not just a physical reward of living in a nice land with great physical promises, for us it's the Kingdom of God; our salvation is literally at stake. We have to have that faith in God and be willing to endure adversity, be willing to endure uncertainty. One of the things that tripped them up here, which is inherent to human nature is, we don't like uncertainty. What are we going to face? In their case, they are looking at giants and asking how are we going to deal with giants? How are we going to deal with these issues, because we don't really know? They aren't thinking,

"Wait a minute, we are following a God who parted an ocean. He brought all the plagues on the Egyptians. He rains down food from the sky six days a week—I think He has this under control."

That doesn't really occur to them. They are just scared because uncertainty doesn't feel good and they don't want to deal with it. As Christians we have to be willing to deal with uncertainty and to follow God. Even if that means going it alone and being the only one. What we are about to do is look at a couple of examples in the Bible of some of our heroes in Hebrews 11. Who were those heroes of faith. Notice they had to literally go it alone. They were in environments where they were the only people converted in their time. There was no "*Follow the strong leader or the strong culture around them—follow the herd*". That wasn't really an option. Let's look at that and learn from their examples.

Turn back to Hebrews 11 and let's look at Abraham—the Bible refers to him as the “Father of the Faithful”.

Hebrews 11:8 *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (NKJV)*

Notice this—we're going to see that when we read the actual account in Genesis 12, he doesn't know where he's going. He's literally being told by God,

“Pack up all your stuff, leave everything that's familiar to you, go that way and I'll tell you when to stop.”

He has to act upon faith and head out into the unknown, trusting that God is going to work it out somehow, not knowing what's going to be next. What's over the next hill? Where am I headed to? I don't really know; I'm just supposed to head out and go in this direction and God will tell me when to stop. That's the ultimate in dealing with uncertainty and what Abraham had to deal with.

9) By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise;

10) for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

11) By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. (NKJV)

In other words, Sarah was beyond menopause and physically impossible for her to get pregnant but God worked it out.

12) Therefore, from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. (NKJV)

Continuing in verse 17) ...

17) By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,

18) of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,”

19) concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. (NKJV)

So not only is he asked to abandon everything that is familiar to him and head off on a journey where he isn't even sure where he's going, but he's promised that God is going to bless him and he's going to have a great nation that descends from him, Christ is

going to be one of his descendants. This all requires that he has a son, for any of this to come about. As we're going to see, he has to wait 25 years for that son to even be born and then he's asked to take that son out and kill him. You can imagine in the back of his mind, how is this supposed to work?

I waited 25 years to have a son and this is a requirement for any of these promises to come about and now you want me to kill him?

What? You could see how his physical mind would have a hard time with this. He had faith and says he is just going to trust God; He's going to work it out somehow. I'm just going to have faith in Him and he faithfully endures through it all. This is what we have to be willing to do. To face adversity and uncertainty, even when we don't know exactly what our future looks like.

Turn to Genesis 12 and we'll see the actual account of where this took place.

Genesis 12:1 *Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you.
2) I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.
3) I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
4) So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (NKJV)*

Notice he is being told, pack up your stuff, head that way, I'll tell you when to stop. He doesn't know where he is going, he doesn't know all the details. For us as physical human beings, we tend to be like,

"No, I want to know the details, I want to know what to expect. I want to know where I'm going to sleep, what I'm going to eat. Where am I going to stay? How is this all going to work out?"

God says, "I'll fill you in when you get there." He just has faith in God and says, "Ok, I'm going to follow along and God's going to work it out somehow." I'm sure when he took off initially and was being made all these promises, he's not thinking that it's going to be 25 years until I have a son before that could even be a possibility for any of this to work out. We won't cover this part of the story today but there was a point where he and Sarah both started doubting. She's past menopause now, so how is any of this supposed to work. Even they had their moments of doubting. He's 75 years old when this happens. He's 100 when Isaac is born. He has to wait 25 years for this son to be born. He had to have a lot of patience and endurance. He had to wait on Yehovah as the Bible tells us numerous times—*wait on the Lord*. He had to wait on Him and just have patience, knowing God was going to work it out in His time and I just have to trust Him and endure and be faithful and wait for Him to tell me when it's time for it to

happen. I have to bend to His will. It's not my will be done; it's His will be done. He had to live like that.

Even after all of this happens, he finally gets a son, that all this can be fulfilled through and then God throws an absolute curve ball at him. He says, now I want you to take that son, take him into the mountain and kill him for Me. Turn to Genesis 22 and we'll read this story. This is the ultimate story of just having faith in God. I'm sure in the back of his mind, he's wondering how is this going to work out? In addition to those issues, just think of how emotionally grueling this has to be, for a father who waited 25 years to have this kid, who has raised him now—we don't know exactly what Isaac's age is here, but just from Isaac carrying the wood and other things involved, he's probably at least a teenager by the time this is taking place—but imagine the emotional turmoil that this has to put a father through of, you mean I have to kill him? This has got to be a brutal trial for him to go through.

Genesis 22:1 *Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."*

2) *Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."*

3) *So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.*

4) *Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off.*

5) *And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."*

6) *So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together.*

7) *But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*

8) *And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together. (NKJV)*

Just imagine emotionally what that was like for Abraham. Knowing what he has been asked to do and now his son is asking, "Where's the sacrifice?" Imagine the lump in his throat when he's responding to his son. The emotional turmoil this has to put this man through.

9) *Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.*

10) *And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

11) *But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am."*

12) *And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."*

13) *Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. (NKJV)*

As we read from Hebrews 11, it tells us that Abraham basically concluded that if needs be, God can resurrect him. He doesn't know that God is going to stop him at the last minute and he's not going to have to go through with something he doesn't want to have to do, which is killing his own son. He just has to trust God that God's going to work it out somehow. You can imagine how painful this was, but notice as he's going through all of this, in Abraham's time, no one else is converted at this time. He doesn't get to follow a physical leader; he doesn't get to go along with the structure around him. He has to go it alone. He has to trust in God and obey Him, in spite of everything else around him. I'm sure it was a lonely situation for him to deal with. That's what we're all called to do. We're called to be salmon going up stream and to faithfully obey God, even when that's difficult, even if we have to go it alone. Even if we are going against the social structure around us. We can't just be the one who wants to follow the herd and do what's comfortable. Another great example of this is Joseph. I think there were a number of things in Joseph's situation that are really noteworthy to me.

One is the fact of how young he is when he receives these dreams. When Joseph was 17 years old, God gave him a couple of dreams and revealed to him that his brothers are going to bow down to him. His father, his mother, all of his siblings are going to bow down to him ultimately. A typical 17-year-old kid, he goes and brags about it to the rest of the family, which wasn't really a smart move to do but typical of what a 17-year-old boy would do—go and brag about it. Just imagine from his point of view from expectations, I'm sure he is imagining that he's going to be a big shot and everything is going to work out great for him. He's not imagining that he's going to be thrown in a well, sold off into slavery, wind up at Potiphar's house and set up with false rape allegations and thrown into prison and go on for 13 years before life ever even gets better. It's going to be 22 years from the time he receives this dream before any of this gets fulfilled. What's amazing to me about this situation is that not only is Joseph faithful through all of this is that if Joseph he ever loses faith in God through all of this, or has an attitude about how nothing has gone how he anticipated it to go, the Bible doesn't record anything to indicate that that's the case. It records him shooting his mouth off and bragging to his brothers how he's going to be a big shot and everyone is going to bow down to him. But then he gets thrown into a well, sold into slavery, and is faithful through all of this. In Potiphar's house, in prison, through all of his. Never once, at least through what is recorded, does he ever have an attitude and get mad at God for treating him like this.

In chapter 39—we'll skip through for time's sake the whole story of his dream and being thrown into the well. I think we're all familiar with that. You can imagine this doesn't turn out at all as he would have anticipated. He has a dream they are all going to bow

down to him, I'm sure he's thinking he is going straight to the top, straight to prestige and honor and that is not what happens. In fact, he is faithful to God and he gets punished for it.

Genesis 39:1 *Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there.*

2) *The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.*

3) *And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand.*

4) *So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.*

5) *So it was, from the time that he had made him overseer of his house and all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; and the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had in the house and in the field.*

6) *Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.*

7) *And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me."*

8) *But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand.*

9) *There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"*

10) *So it was, as she spoke to Joseph, day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her.*

11) *But it happened about this time, when Joseph went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house was inside,*

12) *that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.*

13) *And so it was, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and fled outside,*

14) *that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, "See, he has brought in to us a Hebrew to mock us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice.*

15) *And it happened, when he heard that I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me, and fled and went outside."*

16) *So she kept his garment with her until his master came home.*

17) *Then she spoke to him with words like these, saying, "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me;*

18) *so it happened, as I lifted my voice and cried out, that he left his garment with me and fled outside."*

19) *So it was, when his master heard the words which his wife spoke to him, saying, "Your servant did to me after this manner," that his anger was aroused.*

20) Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison.

21) But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

22) And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing.

23) The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper. (NKJV)

First to be humorous about this, if we put this in a modern-day context, what happened to Joseph was, he got what we would call today, "Me Too- ed". If you are familiar with the "Me Too" movement, where it turned into not only taking serious allegations of sexual abuse or rape, but it became "Believe all women". Any allegation made by a woman; you automatically have to believe it without evidence. That's what happened to Joseph; he didn't do anything wrong. He rejected the advances of a woman coming after him and then she punished him for rejecting her by fake rape allegations and got him thrown in prison. So basically, Joseph was a completely honorable guy the whole time and he gets punished for it. If you think about Joseph's life, it wasn't very wise for him to brag in front of his brother of how they were going to bow down to him, but he was honestly, just conveying that God had given him a dream and he believed God that He was going to truly do this. He was being obedient to him here. He was being obedient when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife as well. Consistently he is being punished for doing what is right because, from a physical perspective, from his point of view, things keep going wrong. He's thrown into a well, he's thrown into prison, he keeps getting punished, he's an honorable guy who is faithfully obeying God the whole time and everything just keeps going wrong and he keeps getting punished.

He's an incredible example of faith because if he wanted to just look at the physical circumstances and the pain he is going through, you could totally understand this guy developing an attitude.

"I was faithful to God, he gives me this dream, I just told the truth about it and I got sold into slavery. Then I got tempted to commit adultery with my owner's wife and I did the right thing and rejected it and I got thrown in prison for it."

This goes on for 13 years before he is finally out and given a position of honor. Talk about an example of faith, because he has to believe in God and trust Him through this whole time. He doesn't have a social structure around him; some positive peer pressure going in the right direction. No, everything is going the opposite and he has to trust in God and just have faith in Him and endure, regardless of what is happening around him. That's the example we all have to follow. That's the covenant we made at baptism. That we would obey God regardless of the circumstances. If that meant forsaking everything else around us, forsaking the social structure, even potentially losing our own lives, that's what we agreed to. That's what it requires to follow God—we have to have that faith in Him.

To bring this to a conclusion, turn back to Hebrews 11 and notice in particular the latter part of the chapter. Oftentimes we love to focus on the earlier parts of the chapter because it's all the nice, "feelgood" stories that we like to focus on. The people who believed in God He worked everything out for them, He performed miracles and they were protected and delivered from the pain and it turned out well. But we also need to pay attention to the end of the chapter as well. It gives us all the examples of the people who got tortured and killed and died doing what was right. Their ultimate reward is going to be in the resurrection, but it wasn't in this physical life. Pick up in verse 35 of Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:35 *Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.*

36) Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment.

37) They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—

38) of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

39) And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise,

40) God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (NKJV)

They were looking to New Jerusalem. As it says of Abraham, he looked to that city whose builder and maker was God. They were looking to the ultimate reward of salvation, being made as a God being and being born into the Kingdom. That's what we have to do in our physical lives. Having faith in God and trusting in Him to work it out. Even if that is a Joseph experience, where you just have to endure and you're the only one, you're by yourself and even if you get punished for doing what's right. Every time you think things are going to turn out, you have to wait a little longer. Ultimately it worked out. It took 22 years but eventually his brothers did bow down before him and the promises he was given did happen. The same will work out for us. If we faithfully endure, we will be rewarded with the Kingdom of God. We have to remember, as we're on this spiritual journey, it's our physical tendency as human beings—we can see, going from Mount Sinai forward—mankind has always had a tendency to follow a strong leader, to follow the social structure around us. We want to go along with the stream, follow the herd. That's not the commitment we made at baptism. The commitment we made at baptism is that we would follow God. We were making a covenant with Him that we would follow Him regardless of what that meant. We are willing to put Him above everything else in our lives, even if that means giving up our own lives.

As we go forward from this Sabbath, let's make sure that we are looking to God and that we are developing the faith to follow God.