

Living by Faith: In the Midst of Stress

Hebrews 11:23-28

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In 1993 Kevin Carter took the disturbing but Pulitzer-Prize winning photo of the young Sudanese child starving to death with the vulture waiting in the background – even if it's been 20 years since you saw that photo you know which one I'm talking about. It is an incredibly unsettling picture, but one that captured the hearts of the world and greatly increased awareness and support for what was going on in the Sudan at that time.

After taking the photo Carter chased the vulture away and then wept beside his truck as he watched the young child slowly picked herself up and continue limping towards a feeding station.

Seeing things like he did on a daily basis brought a lot of stress into Carter's life. And a year later, at only 33, he couldn't live with it anymore. And so he took his own life, pumping carbon monoxide into his truck. When interviewed his father said "Kevin always carried around the horror of the work he did."¹

Now few of us have experienced the same kinds of stress that Kevin Carter did, but that doesn't mean our lives aren't full, sometimes to the breaking point, with pressure and strain. While it is different for everyone, stress is almost a universal constant. And the way we live in response to stress demonstrates where we have put our faith and determines how pleasing to God we are.

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Please turn with me to Hebrews chapter 11. Everyone should have a Bible in the pew in front of you. If you are using that Bible you will find today's text on page 852.

We've been in Hebrews 11, in what is often referred to as the "Great Faith Chapter" of the Bible, for several weeks now. And the author of Hebrews started by defining faith saying:

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

And then he has gone on to list examples of what this kind of faith looks like because this kind of faith can be seen with physical eyes – or at least the results of this kind of faith can be seen. It isn't just a belief framework that floats nebulously somewhere in your brain. It can be tasted and felt because it's based on substance and evidence. This faith enables its possessors to live in a way that ultimately pleases God.

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/s/stress.htm>

And actually it is the idea of *pleasing God* that sits at the very center of Hebrews 11. Having faith is the pen-ultimate stepping stone to the ultimate place of pleasing God. And this is why the central idea of the chapter is verse 6:

And 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. (Hebrews 11:6)

Faith doesn't exist for itself, it exists to please God. And so throughout the chapter the author of Hebrews **describes** this God pleasing, life changing faith using examples from history. But this is more than a history lesson, he wants Fort George to become a church full of God pleasers and so he **prescribes** this faith to us.

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Now today we will be picking up in verse 23 and taking four snapshot views into the life of Moses over an 80 year period. Moses certainly was a God-pleaser. But what we are going to see is that his faith really hit the road running in times of extreme stress. And my hope is that if you are in a stressful place today, as we look at Moses' story, you will choose to have faith and please God no matter how bad things look.

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Let's start with the first snapshot in verse 23.

[Read Hebrews 11:23]

Now if you are familiar with the story of the Exodus you know that this was an incredibly tense time in the history of Israel. Four hundred years earlier Joseph had established his family in Egypt in order to provide for them during a very severe famine. But after Joseph died a Pharaoh arose who didn't know who he was and decided to capitalize on the refugees living within his borders and enslaved them.

And so for hundreds of years while the family of Joseph grew into the nation of Israel, a people over a million strong, they found themselves under a heavy hand of oppression.

Eventually one of the Pharaohs decided that in spite of the great labour force Israel was providing him, they were becoming too big to handle so he said:

The Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.... Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live. (Exodus 1:9-10; 22)

And that is the context verse 23 refers to. Now can you imagine the stress this put Moses' parents under? The thought of being required to kill their son undoubtedly seemed impossible to them. Not just because no one in their right

mind could imagine killing their own child, but also because Israel was still living under the blessing God had given Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation." And no more boys meant no great nation. And so they decided to hide Moses for the first three months of his life.

But here there is something in the text that might at first seem a bit confusing. Verse 23 sights two reasons for why they hid Moses, first they thought he was no ordinary child – and any parent can relate to that, but second it says "they were not afraid of the king's edict."

Now at first you might say "well, if they weren't afraid then why did they hide Moses? Why not just carry on with life as normal if they weren't afraid? It sounds very much like they were afraid and instead of relying on faith they were relying on human ingenuity to sneakily take care of the problem on their own instead of trusting God.

Can you see how some people might come up with that line of reasoning? At its core this way of thinking says "if you are going to trust God then you must just give yourself over to Him 100% and let go of taking anything into your own hands. Let go and let God. Right?

But what we see in this verse is that living our faith out is almost never that black and white. Most often its a shade of gray. So let me see if I can demonstrate where some of the grayness comes from in this situation.

First there are two threats in this verse, not just one. The first threat is to Moses and that is the obvious one. Pharaoh wants him dead. But there is a second unstated threat that was just as powerful. Pharaoh commanded Moses' parents to kill their son. And to disobey Pharaoh meant death.

So in the first scenario Moses is actually in danger of his parents throwing him into the Nile – and the parents were under no danger at all. But in the second scenario, because Moses' parents feared God and believed that He was going to make Abraham into a great nation they decided to disobey Pharaoh and therefore put themselves and Moses in danger.

So really the question pivots on who Moses' parents feared more. To fear Pharaoh meant their own safety and the death of Moses, but to fear God meant the hope of preserving Moses while jeopardizing their own safety.

And the text says they didn't fear Pharaoh. Now this doesn't mean they weren't afraid of him – no doubt they were – nobody wants to die, but they weighed this fear against their fear of God and chose to obey God instead. And then in human wisdom they decided the best way for them to obey God was for them to hide Moses.

You see it turns out that human wisdom is not in contradiction with faith. In Colossians Paul tells us:

For this reason... we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way (Colossians 1:9-10)

Living a life that pleases God, especially in stressful situations, requires faith but it also requires the wisdom of the Spirit to act. A life of faith is not a life of sitting back and watching what God will do as though no action or effort on our part was necessary. In fact it is the very opposite of that. A life of faith is a life of wise action!

Two weeks back we talked about how all Christians know what it is that God wants from us. He wants us to look like Jesus in the situations we find ourselves in – that is His will. But while that might sound black and white don't let the few words trick you, often how this plays out is very gray.

I suspect Moses' parents may have entertained the thought "could God really want us to endanger ourselves along with our son? Wouldn't it be better just to keep our heads down and let God raise up the nation of Israel in some other way?" But they chose not to entertain those thoughts. They chose not to fear the threat to their own lives, and they chose to act in faith.

And so I ask you today what does God want from you in the midst of your stressful situation? Maybe finances are tight and you have the opportunity to improve them but the cost of this improvement doesn't feel wise, or perhaps there is a measure of dishonesty involved. Maybe you're sick and it is easy to give in to feeling defeated. Maybe you have a strained relationship and you feel like you are serving more than your fair share. What does it mean for you to look like Jesus in the stressful situation you find yourself in?

The author of Hebrews urges don't be afraid of Pharaoh. Don't fear the cost of obedience. Don't be afraid of what the world outside will think if you start living for Jesus. Don't be afraid of what the people inside the walls of your family or the church will think. Choose to live for Jesus and then use all the wisdom and effort you have at your disposal to find a way to bring God glory in your situation.

That's the first snapshot of Moses' life.

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The second snapshot takes us forward 40 years. Look at verse 24.

[Read Hebrews 11:24-26]

Again if you know the story you know that after Moses' parents were unable to hide him any longer they put him in a basket, placed him in the Nile and he was picked up by the daughter of Pharaoh and raised as her own son.

The crazy part in the story is that Pharaoh's daughter needed a wet nurse to feed Moses so his parents were actually paid to raise their own son for seven years. Now this means Moses knew he was Israelite. He grew up in an Israelite home. He learned about YHWH. But this doesn't mean his choice to associate himself with his blood relatives in contrast to his Egyptian benefactors was easy.

As a prince of Egypt he was given every luxury, trained in the highest levels of education and fed the best food in the land. It would have been so easy to consider an alternative to aligning himself completely with Israel.

For example he could have said, well God has put me in this position of power so what I should do is use my position and wealth to bless those less fortunate. I'll ride the middle ground advocating for Israelite rights but doing it in a way that isn't seen as all out rebellion to Pharaoh. Perhaps I'll try to tell Pharaoh "I understand these people, I'm one of them. If you give them two fifteen minute coffee breaks a day it will increase their productivity and they'll work twice as hard for you." Israel will be happy, Pharaoh will be happy and I'll still enjoy the high life of Egypt.

Can you see how easy that would have been? Can you see how wealthy North Americans like ourselves often use similar lines of reasoning?

But verse 25 says when he had grown up he made the choice not to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

Now around this time Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite and came to the Israelite's defense. Exodus tells us:

Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2:12)

That's cold blooded murder. And Moses figured he had gotten away with it. But the next day when he saw two Israelites fighting and tried to break them up he learned that his supposed "secret" act had actually been posted on Facebook and every one of his two million friends knew exactly what he had done.² At least that's what would have happened today.

And this made Moses fear for his safety and ultimately leave Egypt. But sometimes we think that it was at this moment that Moses made the decision to separate himself from Egypt and align himself with Israel because he had no other choice – Egypt wouldn't have him anymore. But the author of Hebrews wants us to know that's not what happened.

² Exodus 2:14

And that's why it isn't until the third snapshot of Moses' life – verse 27 – that it talks about him leaving Egypt. But in the second snapshot, verses 24 to 26 where we are right now, it tells us about his decision to align himself with Israel and be mistreated along with them. Moses chose this path before he found himself needing to flee Egypt.

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Why? What could have possibly prompted Moses to separate himself from the wealth of Egypt and bring mistreatment upon himself?

Verse 26 gives us the answer. It says “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ” or literally this could read “He regarded disgrace for the sake of the Messiah”, “as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.”

Moses weighed his alternatives and decided that embracing suffering to associate himself with the promise of the coming Deliverer, the Messiah, the Christ, was worth way more than any luxuries of Egypt, and even more than any good he may have been able to accomplish had he kept his position of power. He saw himself as having the opportunity to partner with God's plan, and saw this as a reward of ultimate value.

Now that might sound warm and fuzzy, but can you see the stressful dilemma here?

Moses was a millionaire with powerful connections, and he felt compelled to give that up to align himself with the penniless poppers of Israel to be part of a promise given to his great, great, great, great grandfather Abraham. Can you imagine how long and hard Moses must have thought about his this decision?

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Now there is one more thing here that I don't want us to miss. At the bottom of verse 25 it says Moses chose to do what he did rather than “enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”

What is this talking about? It wasn't Moses' fault that he grew up in Pharaoh's home. How come the option is align himself with Israel or indulge the fleeting pleasures of sin? There is no middle ground!

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Here commentaries disagree a bit. Some feel that Moses was living a sinful lifestyle in Pharaoh's house³ but there is really no evidence to support this. And so I agree with other commentaries that say the sin Moses chose against was the sin of doing nothing when “the path of duty [was] clear before him.”⁴ Moses felt the conviction to be involved in what God was doing and chose to obey rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin by living a life of personal comfort.

³ <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/hebrews-11-25.html>

⁴ Bruce. F.F. “The Epistle to the Hebrews” (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub co.), 1973. pg 319

And here is where I think this really strikes home for North American Christians. As we have seen before, an income of just \$12,000 a year makes you one of the richest 10% of people who have ever lived on this planet. And an income of \$50,000 puts you in the top 1%. So we are an incredibly wealthy people.

But we are also an incredibly comfortable people. More than anything else right now North Americans value comfort. Just for example right now across Canada there is a debate raging as to whether or not we should legalize Physician assisted suicide. And the intrinsic value of human life as bearing the image of God, is being placed secondary in importance to the perceived comfort of people. If we are uncomfortable we would rather die than live!

At the same time there are great concerns in the world around us. On a global scale children are dying of starvation, disease and a simple lack of clean water while the church of North America has the resources necessary to help. And at a local level Christianity is in a rapid state of decline all across Canada and the church is seen as outdated and irrelevant by society.

And here we... I... sit in relative comfort enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin by doing very little.

Friends, perhaps the reason we often feel like we don't know what God wants us to do with our lives is because we are too afraid of losing our comfort to ask. Today God's word to me and to us is "ask Me what My will is for you." Pray, God how could I look like Jesus to my neighbour, I'm willing to give up anything to do it. Or here at church, "God how could I be part of increasing Your glory and expanding Your kingdom through Fort George Baptist Church? God I'm willing to pay any price to see it happen. Friends if we will pray these prayers and then obey regardless of how much comfort it costs us we will become a church full of God-pleasers.

That's what the second snapshot into Moses' life gives us.

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The third snapshot comes in verse 27.

[Read Hebrews 11:27]

This third snapshot takes place shortly after the second and just after the fateful killing of the Egyptian slave driver.

Now there is a strong parallel here between Moses and his parents in snapshot one. Here Hebrews says Moses didn't fear the king's anger and left Egypt in faith.

But Exodus tells us after he killed the Egyptian:

Moses was **afraid** and thought, 'What I did must have become known.'
(Exodus 2:14)

So I ask you, was Moses afraid or wasn't he? Were his parents afraid when they hid their baby or weren't they? Hebrews says "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger."

Here's the parallel. Moses' parents were afraid for their baby's safety but they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh's threats against their own safety so they hid Moses.

Here Moses no doubt was afraid for his life, but it wasn't ultimately fear that led him to flee Egypt, there was something greater. Verse 27 tells us what that was. "He persevered (or some translations read "he endured") because he saw Him who is invisible."

The main reason Moses left Egypt was out of perseverance or endurance not fear of Pharaoh. Now what does this mean? How was Moses persevering?

Well, he was persevering down the path that he had chosen in the previous snapshot. Moses had already chosen to align himself with Israel and God's promised Messiah, and so now in human wisdom he concluded that the best way for him to continue down this path was to leave Egypt on the double.

And Hebrews says Moses persevered because He saw Him who was invisible. Moses saw God at work, he saw and he trusted and he wanted to be part of God's plan so he acted in faith.

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Friends, faith in God does not mean putting yourself in harm's way for no reason, or not doing everything in your power to get yourself out of harm's way. Faith means placing your trust in the "assurance of things hoped for" – the promise that God has saved you and wants us to bring His message of salvation to the world around us – and then using all of your energy and every ounce of your creativity to bring that goal into reality.

Friends, what is God's will for your life? How can you look like Jesus in your neighbourhood and here at church? How can you live out your faith in a way that will please God? If you are breathing today God isn't done with you, use everything you've got to please your Saviour.

That's the third snapshot.

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The final snapshot takes us 40 years forward to the point when Moses finally returns under God's command to oppose Pharaoh and demand that he let Israel go. Look at verse 28.

[Read Hebrews 11:28]

This of course makes reference to the 10th plague that God struck Egypt with before Pharaoh finally let Israel go. Again Moses found himself in a very stressful situation, standing before the most powerful man on earth and telling him that God was going to kill his son if he didn't submit.

And without getting into this in too much detail, the author of Hebrews wants us to see the connection between Moses' actions of faith and our own in the context of God's plan of redemption. Salvation was coming to Israel through the shed blood of a lamb. God was doing this with or without Moses, but because Moses chose to align himself with what God was doing he got to be part of God's plan to save the children of Israel. And in a similar way God wants to use us to save the city of Prince George.

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Brothers and sisters, God has a will for each and every one of us. We exist for a purpose. God wants to use us to increase His glory and expand His kingdom here at Fort George and in this city.

And as we seek to live out the life God wants for us we shouldn't be surprised when we find ourselves having to do this in the midst of even the extreme stresses of life.

But before we find ourselves in those situations, or in spite of the situations you are already in, we must choose to align ourselves, in faith, with what God is doing in our city, our church, our home and our lives. And when we do this, forsaking the temporary pleasures of sin that comfort instead of action brings, we will find ourselves pleasing God.

Friends, stress without hope leaves no way out but death, as Kevin Carter found. But stress with the assurance of things hoped for leads to a radically God-pleasing life. So the author of Hebrews urges us today to allow this kind of faith to fuel our lives.

Now make no mistake, he makes no promises that a life of faith will be stress free – rather quite the opposite. But when we joyfully seek God's reward more than our own comfort and focus our eyes on the unseen God who is at work in our midst, Hebrews promises we will find ourselves pleasing God, like Moses, in the midst of life that would otherwise be paralyzingly stressful.

Friends, whatever your situation, choose in faith to obediently look like Jesus and please God.