



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

HEROES FROM HEBREWS, #7



Tenacious Faith: Finishing What God
Started — Hebrews 11:20–22
Tim Badal | July 1, 2018

This summer we're looking at the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. Each week we study one of the inductees that God, by His grace, has placed in this Hall of Faith. These were ordinary people, very much like you and me, yet they did great things for God through obedience and trust. They exhibited great faith in the God Who had promised things to them. Even when they didn't see these promises come to pass, they believed God and acted according to those beliefs.

Over the past couple weeks, we've been looking at the life of Abraham. He's a major character in Hebrews 11, as his story covers over one-fourth of the chapter. But he was also a major character in the Old Testament. Many chapters in Genesis are dedicated to the events in Abraham's life.

Today, we'll go in rapid-fire fashion over the next three generations following Abraham: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Each of these men was given one verse in Hebrews 11. We'll see how each of them exhibited tenacious faith—faith that persevered and endured, staying true when it mattered the most at the end of their lives.

We'll also see that they weren't perfect men. They had idiosyncrasies and dysfunctions. Quite frankly, they had sins that at times really crippled their relationship with God. Yet at the end of their lives, each of these men looked forward and blessed their children and future generations, calling them to "pass the baton" regarding faith in God's promises.

This morning I also want to look at what it means for us to have a tenacious faith, a faith that perseveres. Quite frankly, living the Christian life can sometimes be difficult and requires endurance. We too need to learn how to finish the race we've started. There are things we can learn from the example of these three men about what it takes to finish strong.

Let's see why these men are commended by God in Hebrews 11:20–22.

²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Usually I begin my sermons with a story or anecdote to set the stage for our discussion. Today I'm going to show you a video, but first let me give you some context. This video shows something that takes place in Mexico City at the 1968 Olympics. The last event of the entire Olympics is the marathon. You'll see guys finishing the race in first, second and third place. But then word begins to get around that one of the favorite runners who was expected to finish high in the standings had taken a very bad fall. As a result, he had badly injured his knee and leg. Still, despite the internal damage, bleeding and severe pain, this runner from Tanzania kept going.

[Video— www.villagebible.org/finishtherace]

What an incredible story of endurance, perseverance and a no-quit attitude. He did not give in but pushed himself to the limits and fought through the temptation to leave the race. I didn't know this story until this week, but I was struck with the quote I think is so important for us as Christians to hear. He says, "My country did not send me here to start the race, but to finish it."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I want to make something abundantly clear to you this morning. Taking what we just heard, our God in heaven did not send you here just to start a race on earth. He sent you here to finish it. Of course, starting the race is easy. Have you ever watched the Chicago Marathon or any of the marathons? At the beginning of the race, everyone is smiling. They're all high-fiving. They're joking around. Then about mid-way through the race, there is no joking, no smiling. There are faces of agony, pain, perseverance and endurance. As they get farther and farther along the course, people begin to question whether they should even continue. I think it's the Boston Marathon that reports how many runners opt out of the race. Thousands and thousands of runners start the race, but only a fraction ever finish.

As a Christian, we start our race at our conversion with smiles on our faces. We feel the embrace of God's presence and enjoy His favor. We think about all He's going to do in our lives. Then we start running. The muscles start to tighten. The stomach begins to cramp. The fatigue begins to set in. Whether it's temptations or trials or tribulations, running the race for Jesus isn't easy—it's hard. That's why the Bible calls it a race. It's not easy.

The Bible also doesn't lead us to believe it will be a short sprint. Rather, the Christian life is a long, drawn-out marathon. One of our tendencies, therefore, is to give up on the race. We quit when the going gets tough. But we need to realize the Bible is filled with exhortations to press on, to keep going, even when the going gets tough. We're especially encouraged to look at the example Christ Himself gave us. We see that even when He was tired, He kept going. When He wanted to give up and quit, He didn't. And because He finished His race, we enjoy the great benefits and blessing of being in a relationship with God.

Tenacious faith comes when we remember the context of the book we're studying.

If we want to understand Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, we have to back up a little bit. We're about half-way through our series in Hebrews, so it's a good time to stop and remember why we're studying this chapter. When putting together a sermon series, we do so with a lot of forethought. But there can be a tendency when taking a chapter like this to take it out of its context. In the case of Hebrews 11, we can look at it simply as a series of biographical sketches that can provide us with lessons about moral truths. But we need to remember that this chapter is an important part of the entire book of Hebrews. If we extract it from its context, we can miss the overall point of the book.

Hebrews is a letter written to Christians exhorting them not to give up. The Christians in that day were struggling. Life was very hard. There was always a temptation to leave the race instead of enduring all the difficulties that living for Christ involved. But the writer is saying, "Don't give up. Don't give in. Don't quit. There are great rewards waiting for you."

The writer begins the book by reminding us why our endurance is so important. It's because knowing Jesus is far superior to anything we might gain from the world. As a result, Jesus is worth the endurance. He is worth any hardship or struggle. But things had gotten really difficult for the people to whom the book of Hebrews was being written. Their culture was pushing them around. The basis for Hebrews 11 can be found in Hebrews 10:32-39. This will help us understand why the writer then gave us chapter 11.

³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

³⁷ For,

"Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him."

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

These people were in prison and were having their property stolen from them because they were following Christ. The Roman world did not allow people to show allegiance to Christ. This helps us realize that in the middle of any trial or tribulation, we need to endure and not shrink back. When we are being pushed back by our culture, we must choose to live with patience and perseverance.

Hebrews 11 then provides a picture to demonstrate to the readers of Hebrews that they were not the first to struggle, that they were not the only ones who had to exhibit faith. In fact, Hebrews 11 was written to assure them that faith was the key to their survival. They needed to have a strong and abiding faith in order to finish their race.

But we ask, how do we do that? It's hard. We can feel isolated. The writer tells us that we'll be able to press on when we allow other Christians to surround us, to help and encourage us. Look again at Hebrews 10, this time beginning in verse 19.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

God has saved us and cleansed us. He has made promises to us, so now our job as followers of Christ is not to waver, but to endure. We would ask, "How do we do that?" He answers, "You do it with the help of others." Notice that in Hebrews 10:19–26 there are over ten plural pronouns. Christianity is never to be done in isolation. Three times he writes, "Let us..." He says we enter the holy places. We have a great high priest. We are the ones who have had our hearts sprinkled clean, our bodies washed with water. Who are "we"? We're the collective body of believers. God says endurance is found in a relationship with one another. The writer continues in chapter ten:

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

It's up to us to spur one another on to love and good works. That's why being an active part of the body is so important. We gather together as Christians to encourage one another. We're all running this race and all of us can be tempted to give up and leave the race. As a pastor, far too often I've seen people encounter things that are too hard or temptations that are too real, so they decide they want out.

But as followers of Christ, it is important for us to encourage and help one another stay in the race. Hebrews 11 gives us pictures of people who were able to finish the race. Even though they endured very difficult circumstances and hard tests and temptations, they still crossed the finish line. Think about how encouraging it is to know that our race has been run and finished by people before us.

If we look on the other side of Hebrews 11, at Hebrews 12, we can get the other bookend part of this lesson. Notice what it says in verse one: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."* Most people interpret this verse by identifying the "cloud of witnesses" as being the people described in chapter 11. But I would expand that to include the people who are around us right now, the people referred to in Hebrews 10:24–25.

You might be running very slowly right now, with lots of weights and hindrances that are causing you to struggle. Everything in you is wanting to quit the race. You think, "Walking with Jesus is just too hard." Then you come to church and a great cloud of witnesses speaks to you and encourages you to keep running. They remind you that if you don't give up, there's a great end in sight. One of the best parts of Village Bible Church is our multi-generational nature. We have older people who are near the end of their race, yet they can encourage the younger ones who are just starting. At the same time, the younger ones can sometimes encourage those who are near the end not to give up.

Now that we've looked at the context of Hebrews 11, we can better understand why it was written. Its purpose was to encourage the readers, including ourselves, not to give up but to live with endurance. So, let's look next at the three Bible characters that are included in today's verses: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

Tenacious faith comes when we remember three characters from the Bible.

We've just spent nearly ten verses on one man—Abraham—but now there is only one verse each for his son, his grandson, and his great-grandson. As you might suppose, we aren't going to go into great detail about any of these men. The stories of their lives can be found in the last half of Genesis, where you can see how God worked in their lives. If you read these stories, you'll see how God used them, but you'll also discover them to be very earthly people, doing life much as we do life.

Notice that all three come from the same family line, so there's a level of DNA they have in common. Yet despite this, they are all incredibly different from one another. We know this to be true in our own families. We are different from our siblings, and each of our children and grandchildren are also unique. Even though we come from the same gene pool, there are a lot of real differences

even between very close relatives. Likewise, the three men we're looking at today are all very different as well. Each of them engages life in a unique way.

Second, each man encountered different experiences in different circumstances. In our families as well, regardless of how close-knit we are, the circumstances of our lives are different. Some people seem to have everything go well for them throughout life, while others deal with troubles almost daily.

Each one of these men—Isaac, Jacob and Joseph—had different characters and lived in different circumstances. We also know from Romans 3:23 that they all sinned and fell short of the glory of God. In some cases, we are given a whole litany of their sins—especially in Jacob's life. We really don't see Joseph doing anything evil or wrong, but we can still know he was a sinner like you and me. And because of this, we can be assured that they all made compromises in their lives. They made bad decisions that kept them from being reconciled to God.

These men had differences, but they were also similar. The writer of Hebrews gives us two of their similarities.

Because they all had faith in the same God, we know—in spite of the times when their family relationships seemed brutal—they had somehow managed to pass their faith down through the generations. Four generations walked with God and believed in God because of this heritage.

This is a reminder for us as parents and grandparents that our job goes beyond making sure we ourselves are okay with God. We're also called, to the best of our ability, to transfer faith from our generation to the next generation and the generation after that. That can mean we have to do this with a deliberate plan and focus, looking to the future and realizing that it's not "every man for himself." After all, someone handed us their faith with the hope that we would pass it on as well—especially to those closest to us.

Not only did these men share a common faith, but they also demonstrated it especially as they neared the end of their lives. In Hebrews 11:20–22, the writer points specifically to the final days of the life of each of these characters. There's no mention of what happens when they're young or when they're in middle age. Rather, the focus is literally on the final moments of their lives, as they are approaching death.

In the most important time, when they needed to show faith, they did. They finished the race as faithful people. Let's look at each of them very quickly and pull a lesson or two from each of them.

Isaac: Faithfulness is found in mundane obedience.

Isaac was the promised son of Abraham, and from his life we learn that faithfulness is found in mundane obedience. We really don't know much about Isaac. You would think that Moses, who wrote Genesis, would have told us a lot about Isaac. He was the miracle son of promise. For almost 100 years they had waited for him to be born. He was the fulfillment of a promise God made to Abraham and Sarah that He would make them a great nation. Yet for some reason Isaac seems to fall under the shadow of his father. Abraham was a man of great notoriety, but it appears that Isaac was actually pretty ordinary. We know he went about digging wells for people. That was an important work, but it didn't involve any grandeur or acclaim that set him apart.

Isaac did encounter God at various points, but nowhere near the extent his father did, nor to the extent his son Jacob would either. In many ways, he seems to be an odd transitional figure. He's an average guy who goes about living life. He gets married and has two sons, but the family is far from perfect. Rather, the family is filled with favoritism and prejudice.

As a result, we see him make some decisions that, while not exactly sinful, were still unwise and cost him dearly. Yet overall he appears to be a faithful man doing the best he can with life. That should bring solace to some of us, because we too might not find ourselves on the front lines of ministry, but rather we stay behind the scenes.

Our lives might be little more than quiet obedience to God, without anyone acknowledging what we do. We might not be popular. We might not be known for having a large number of Twitter followers. We might simply stay in the shadows—and that's okay. God is not impressed by the big, bombastic things we do; He cares about our mundane, everyday obedience.

Some of the most noble and faithful people I know have never been on a stage. They just faithfully serve, and nobody really knows who they are. Our world is filled with missionaries whom nobody knows, but who faithfully share the gospel. Our Sunday School and children's and youth ministries are filled with people who will never have a spotlight on them. But they're teaching God's Word every Sunday and every Wednesday.

If you are something of an Isaac, I want you to know God sees what you're doing, and you will be commended for your faithfulness. God does not seek pomp and circumstance; He wants obedience. At the end of his life, Isaac looked to his sons and blessed them. Literally, this was a transfer of all he believed about God, all he knew about God, and all he saw coming in the future. This is what Isaac gave to his sons, Jacob and Esau. He blessed them and commended their lives to God. Isaac died being commended for his faith.

Isaac was a lackluster guy, nothing to write home about, just faithfully serving, but his son Jacob is a different story.

Jacob: Faithfulness can be found even after a life of mess-ups.

Jacob is the personification of two songs I've grown to love: first, "Bad to the Bone" by George Thorogood and the Destroyers, and second, Credence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising."

Jacob was trouble from the beginning—and by the beginning, I mean in utero. He and his twin brother Esau were wrestling even before they were born. Then as they were being birthed, Jacob grabbed at Esau's leg. His life continued this pattern. Jacob fought everyone. He was a deceiver, a scoundrel, a thief. He reneges on his promises. Yet here we see how faithfulness can be found even after a life of mess-ups.

Jacob was an unfaithful guy who seemed to want to fight everyone he encountered—not only humans, but God as well. At Jacob's greatest point of rebellion, God met him. But instead of worshiping God, Jacob wrestled Him. Now, that's a dumb thing to do, right? What's even crazier is that Jacob put up a good fight. Talk about perseverance. Scripture says Jacob wrestled with God all night long.

Now, maybe God wasn't trying that hard. But this gives us a picture of Jacob's attitude. "I don't care Who You are. I don't care what Your name is. I don't care if You're God Himself. If You get in my way, I'm going to fight You until I either win or die trying." As a result, God broke Jacob's hip, so he limped the rest of his life.

I could spend ten weeks on the life of Jacob, but in short, Jacob's life is one mess-up after another. It is a car crash you can't turn away from—you just have to watch it. It's a train wreck. And he lives his life with a pattern of selfishness and anger and deception, striving against others.

But here in Hebrews 11:21, we find that Jacob is commended as properly belonging in the Hall of Faith. How can a treacherous, deceitful sinner like Jacob be commended for his faith? Brothers and sisters, it's the same way you and I, as dirty rotten scoundrels, have been brought into the family of God—by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. At some point Jacob pulled it all together. Later in his life, he made the decision to stop deceiving, to stop fighting. Instead, he chose to submit to God and began to live in obedience to Him.

It might be that some of you are wondering today if God will receive you after all you've done. You have rebelled against Him. But God's grace and mercy have been extended to you, so that when you confess your sin—as Jacob did—God will be faithful and just to forgive you (1 John 1:9).

So, no matter what your mess-up is, no matter what sinful decisions you have made in the past, you can choose obedience today, and God will find you faithful—because He is faithful to forgive you.

After a life of mess-ups, Jacob ends his life by blessing Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. We also read in Genesis that Jacob reminded his grandchildren that their God was not the god of Egypt and that their place of residence would not be in Egypt, but in Canaan and with God. He asked Joseph to carry his bones there, casting a vision of what God wanted to do in the future.

Joseph: Faithful is measured through our trials, temptations and triumphs.

A couple years ago we did a long study on the life of Joseph which took 12 Sundays. I don't have that much time this morning. I've got about a minute and a half. But here's what you need to know about Joseph's life. His life was a series of perpetual ups and downs. When I say that, I mean real ups and real downs. He goes from the thrill of victory to the agony of defeat; to the thrill of victory to the agony of defeat; to the thrill of victory to the agony of defeat—until he finally ends up with the thrill of victory.

But the span between those thrills and agonies are massive. He's a prized son, then he's punished by his brothers. He's taken into captivity as a slave, then is promoted in Potiphar's house. He's elevated to the second over all of Potiphar's possessions, then Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, who says, "No way" and flees from that temptation, which lands him in prison.

Joseph stays in prison for 13 years. Midway through that trial, he asks a cupbearer to speak well of him before Pharaoh—but the cupbearer forgets. So, for that long season Joseph rots in a prison for a crime he didn't commit. But then Pharaoh has some dreams that cause him great angst, and the cupbearer remembers that Joseph has the ability to interpret dreams. So, they bring Joseph out of prison and he interprets the dreams. He tells Pharaoh there is an impending famine for which he needs to prepare. Because of his wise interpretation, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to the role of prime minister over all Egypt. He marries, he is reunited with his brothers and the story goes on. What man intended for evil, God intended for good (Genesis 50:19–4.1021).

God didn't measure Joseph's life by his ability to achieve the position of prime minister of Egypt. Rather, his faithfulness was measured both by his response to the trials and temptations he faced and also by his response when he was elevated to high positions.

In the same way, our lives can bring tribulation, temptations, or triumphs. But wherever we are, we need to remember that Joseph's faithfulness was seen in every episode in his life—and our faithfulness should be seen there as well. Regardless of our circumstances, we are called to be faithful.

We've seen three characters, with three applications. These guys weren't perfect, and we could spend a long time looking at their mess-ups. But what God commends them for at the end of their lives is that they had found what it meant to be faithful.

So, what do we do with this?

The challenge that is before us in order to be found faithful

Our challenge is that as we run our race, as we grow tired—when circumstances get us down and challenges disappoint us and temptations distract us—we begin to realize that this race isn't easy. But if we're going to be found faithful at end of our race, as these men were, three things are key.

Endurance is the key.

First, we have to keep pressing on. We have to endure. When we're tired and feel like giving up, we must realize that this is normal. Weariness is inevitable. At these points, we're tempted to come up with lots of reasons, even excuses, of why we should quit the race. "The church is doing a bad job at meeting my needs. Nobody cares about me. I served, but nobody appreciated me." The devil will use these kinds of thoughts to make us feel as though we need to isolate ourselves—"I don't need these people." But the more you isolate yourself, the more you become vulnerable to the temptation to give up. When our endurance begins to wane, we stop attending church. We stop involving ourselves with other Christians. It's important to realize something. We think everyone else is doing just fine in their race, and we're the only one who's tired and wants to quit.

I want you to know that I'm glad there are six days between Sundays, because your pastor wants to give up all the time. It's hard. Living this life and enduring the things we have to endure is difficult. But I need you. I turn to you and you encourage me through your example. You encourage me through your words. "Don't give up, Pastor Tim. Don't give in." So I keep going. I keep trucking along. I would have quit a long time ago on my own, but because of you, my "great cloud of witnesses," I find endurance.

Find people who will give you the endurance you need, who will encourage you to keep running the race.

Ending well is the goal.

Endurance is the key but ending well is the goal. It's not how you start the race, but how you finish the race.

I want to speak to a group of individuals who are dear to our church—our senior members. I don't say that in a pejorative way. But you have struggles and issues that are unique to your age group that are different from mine at 42 or from those of our teenagers. You're tired. The body doesn't work like it used to. You don't have the energy and vigor you once did. Things are starting to wane in your life. You're seeing the last of many things that are taking place. In these moments, you can feel marginalized and unimportant. You may feel as though you're not needed. But those are lies from the devil. The greatest thing you can do in the last chapter of your life is to finish well. Here's why.

We, the younger generations, need to see those of you in your 60s, 70s and 80s finishing the race. Why? Because if we don't see how you finish, we will never know how to finish ourselves. Does that make sense? I need men and women who show me, even

though your bodies may be failing, that you trust God and that you're looking forward to heaven. At 42, I need to know that the race is worth it. I need brothers and sisters who finish the race and end well.

And to the rest of us, we need to encourage them, bless them and minister to them. As the younger generations, we need to take care of the needs our seniors have in that last leg of the race. We need to encourage them—and do you know how to encourage older people? Honor them. Respect them. Hold them in high esteem. Listen to their stories. Give them a voice to speak. Though their voices may be frail and quiet, give them opportunities to share what the Lord is teaching them. We need to know how to finish the race well.

Emulating Christ is the path.

Finally—and we can never forget this—we need to emulate Jesus. At the beginning of Hebrews 12, the writer says, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”* Well, who should we be looking to? Verse two: *“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

How do we run the race? With joy in our hearts. Why? Because Jesus showed us that what is coming for us is greater than any trial or tribulation or issue here. Just like that beginning video, we saw a man who was injured and broken and tired, yet he kept running—at times, all he could do was walk. But he knew that his country had not sent him there to start the race, but to finish it.

God has given you a race to run. He didn't just want to see you start it—He wants to see you finish it. And when you do, after that long journey is done, this is what God promises: Jesus will be there at the finish line and will announce to the world, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” And in that moment, all of our toiling, all of our striving, all of our running will have been worth it.

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