

**By Faith...**  
**August 14, 2022**  
**Pastor John Mars**

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! Hear the Word of God from the book of Hebrews, beginning in chapter 11, verse 29 and continuing through chapter 12, verse 2.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people marched around them for seven days.

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in the deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

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

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. May God bless the reading of His word.

Once upon a time, a man was on an epic journey. Several days into his journey, he came across a huge chasm in the earth. He could not find a way down, he could not find a way around, and he could not find a way over. After searching for many days, he came across a rope that was stretched tightly across the chasm. As he pondered the rope, he knew that it was useless to him. He could not cross the chasm using the rope. But, as he pondered, he thought he saw movement on the other side. As he watched, a little dot appeared. He became intrigued and he watched further. The little dot got larger and larger and larger and to his astonishment, he came to the realization that it was a man walking on the rope. As the man's image got bigger and bigger and bigger, he realized there was something in front of the man, and to his amazement, he saw that the man walking on the rope was pushing a wheelbarrow with another man in the wheelbarrow. When they finally reached his side, the man in the wheelbarrow jumped out, thanked the wheelbarrow man profusely, and happily went on his way. Our traveler looked at the wheelbarrow man and said, "Wow, that was amazing! I wish I could do that, because I desperately need to cross this chasm."

The wheelbarrow man said, "Do you believe I can do it?" And our journeyer said, "Well, of course I believe you could do it. I just watched you do it." And he said, "Then, get in!"

And that, my friends, is the difference between belief and faith. Belief believes something can be done. Faith acts on it. For some people, faith comes seemingly relatively easy. But for many of us, if not most of us, faith is much more difficult and we often need to be reminded of God's fidelity. We need to be reminded that God is faithful if we are faithful. That is what the writer of Hebrews is doing in our passage. He is reminding his fellow Hebrews, who are under great persecution, about the faithfulness of God in the past. And if God was faithful in the past, they can depend on Him in the present and in the future, and so can you and I.

The first couple of examples in our scripture, I want to use as examples for us and I want to put it in a context of something that happened to me, because the story about the fall of Jericho has a personal meaning for me. A number of years ago now, I was very discouraged. (I'll back this up and say, most of you don't know this, but I am a night owl. I'm a night owl. I stay up late at night and this has happened all my life. I can remember being six, seven and eight in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and at one o'clock in the morning I'm laying in my bed listening to the Copacabana play across the bay!) But I was up late one night and I was very, very, very discouraged. The denomination that I love seemed hell-bent on destroying itself. Chaos seemed to be the norm in the world and the political situation in the United States was stupid and I was very, very discouraged. And I said, "God, God, I don't want some encouragement, I need some encouragement." And almost immediately the story of Joshua came to my mind and I said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that's what I need to hear." And I flipped on the lights and I got out my Bible and I started to read and I thought of those words, those classic words, where God says to Joshua, "Joshua, be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid of them. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. Therefore, be strong and very courageous." And I started reading the book of Joshua and that's not where I found my encouragement. That story begins like this, God talking to Joshua: He says, "Joshua, Moses my servant is dead." I said, "Oh good, Lord, that's the encouragement I need! Moses is dead. The great leader of men, the great deliverer, the miracle worker, the lawgiver is dead. That's what I need to hear." But God continues. He says, "Moses my servant is dead. Therefore, get up, you and all of these people, and go and possess the land that I have promised you." I said, "What? Moses is dead." And God says, "So what? Get up! Go and possess the land that I have promised you." God is saying, "Yes, Moses is dead. So what? Your mission has not changed. My promises are still good. Go and do what I've told you to do. It makes no difference that Moses is dead; I am not!" And I said, "Oh yeah, so what, there's chaos in the world? So what, there's trouble in the denomination? So what, the political environment is not good? Has that ever changed? My mission is still the same. God's promises are still good."

And so, Joshua got up, got the people ready and they crossed the Jordan River and the first obstacle they came to was Jericho. Now I'm gonna tell you what the Bible doesn't tell you. This is the Gospel according to the sinner John, not the book of John. You read the story in Joshua about their military campaign and it sounds very glorious, but let's be honest about who we're talking about. The children of Israel, the nation of Israel, had wandered in the desert for 40 years. They were desert nomads. They were goat herders, y'all. They were not a military force. Anything that happened to them, any fear they struck in the hearts and lives of the people of the land, is because divine

intervention did it. This is a bunch of desert rats. And so, God says, "Take Jericho." We know from archaeological evidence that Jericho was one of the most fortified cities of the ancient world. There was no way this bunch of goat herders was going to be able to take Jericho without divine intervention. This is what God says to them: "March around the city once a day for six days, blowing horns," (goat horns, by the way). "On the seventh day, march around it several times and shout really loud." Now, Aaron, that sounds like a really great military strategy, doesn't it? I can imagine your commanding officer. You go in to your commanding officer and say, "Well, sir, what we're going to do is for six days, we're going to drive our tanks around the city. On the seventh day we're going to get out and shout real loud and they'll all surrender." I think he'd buy that, don't you? But you see, God had proven faithful and so they listened to what God said. And they shouted and the walls came down, because God is faithful.

The other story out of Jericho is of Rahab, the harlot. It takes place just prior to this. The Israelites had sent two spies into Jericho to kind of look things over. How they ended up at the prostitute's house, I don't know. That's a different story, a different sermon. But they ended up there and she hid them. And the condition of her hiding, she said, "Now I believe that God is with you. I believe that God is with your nation and I believe that God is going to give you this city. But when God gives you this city, remember me and my family." And she hid them and they remembered her. And the writer of Joshua, some years later, says, "And Rahab and her family are living among the Israelites to this day." And oh, by the way, when you read the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew, this non-Jewish prostitute is a member of Jesus Christ's family, by faith. The roll call of history is of people who chose to be in God's minority instead of the earth's majority. What God has done in the past, He can do again. We have a great heritage, but for our belief to become faith, it must be acted on. In other words, if you want to walk on water, you got to get out of the boat.

And so, we come to Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 1. The writer of Hebrews, in reminding his fellow Hebrews of their great heritage, he says, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." We have the biblical witness in the Old Testament and in the New Testament of God's fidelity through the eons. We also have God's witness here in this church, how God has been faithful, how God has fulfilled His promises, and how God has blessed this congregation and how you in turn have been able to be a blessing. Do you know just how much God has blessed Central United Protestant church? Do you know? I think some of you have been here in this congregation and seen this great edifice and enjoyed its great bounty and you really have no idea just how blessed we are. And we take it for granted. I've been struggling with this all week, but I'm going to share it. My last church, we had one quarter of the building you have. One quarter. We had 25,000 square feet. You have over 100,000 square feet. The biggest piece of grass we had was 20 feet wide. Y'all have 11 acres. We had 8 parking places. Y'all have more parking places than Walmart. And our congregation was well over twice the size of this one. Do you know how blessed you are? And the reason this church is so blessed is because of the saints who have come before us who believed God and acted on their faith. We have the biblical record, we have the witnesses of this church, and we have our own personal experience. Has God been faithful in your life? If so, say "Amen!" We have our own personal witness. And since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, the writer of Hebrews says, "Let us put off all that hinders us."

And there are many hindrances. I'm only going to mention three. First of all is our own personal sin. I don't know about you, but I shave my worst enemy every morning. I cause myself more trouble than everybody else combined. I don't know what your sins are, I don't know what your hindrances are, I only know mine. It may be that you have trouble with being judgmental. It may be that you are negative and pessimistic. It may be that you are arrogant. It may be that you are self-loathing. I don't know what your sins are, I don't know what your hindrances are, but the writer of Hebrews says, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us put those things off."

And then there are the distractions of the world. Y'all ever been distracted? Is it my imagination or are the distractions of life multiplying? I thought technology was supposed to make our lives easier! Distractions. Satan provides a multitude of distractions. Again, this is another one of those things that I have been struggling with all week whether I was going to mention or not, but I am. Human sexuality is an important topic. It's important. Should we think about it? Yes. Should we study it? Yes. Should we debate it? Yes. But I am afraid that my own personal denomination has become obsessed with it and has allowed itself to be distracted and derailed from making the main thing the main thing. It appears to me that Satan has used the topic to keep us from focusing on our mission, that of making disciples of Jesus Christ. It appears to me, and this is my opinion, that we have become derailed, distracted and off base and off task. If we had put the same type of energy into making disciples as we have debating human sexuality, we would be way, way further down the road. Amen or oh me, because I believe that to be true. Sins that hinder us, distractions.

And then, last but not least, and this may be the most insidious: second best. And let me pause here and explain what I mean by that. Almost 40 years ago, I was sitting at my old (and it was old 40 years ago) oak desk that Aaron now sits at (I passed it on) and I was disgusted with myself. It was Saturday night. I remember it well. I remember the night. I remember where I was. I remember everything about it because it was so poignant. I was disgusted with myself. Why was I disgusted? Because I had a whole list of things that I felt God wanted me to do that week and I got none of them accomplished. You ever been there? You say, "Well, you're a pastor. Of course, there's unexpected things come up." Not that week. There wasn't an emergency. Nobody died. There was nobody in the hospital. As I thought about my week, I hadn't done anything bad that I remember. And the things that I had done were good things, but I hadn't done any of the things that God had put on my heart to do. And like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky, God showed me that Satan does not mind if you do good things, as long as you don't do the things God wants you to do. And this is where he gets mature, dedicated, well-meaning Christians, gets us to doing good stuff and not doing God's will. Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders us: the sin that hinders us, the distractions that hinder us, and the good stuff that hinders us. And how do we respond? How do we solve that? I'm glad you asked, because the writer of Hebrews addresses that. He says, "Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Christ's likeness is our goal. Christ's likeness is our task and nothing else is worthy of our time and energy and nothing else is our standard. And yes, it is a constant battle; yes, it is a constant progress, but fix your eyes on Jesus who is also our inspiration, who has showed us our way. He is also our means through which we do that, in the Holy Spirit. He is our example of perseverance and consistency and persistency. We walk by faith, not by sight. That's our job. Satan's job is to get us distracted, to get us to fail, get us distracted and get us to settle for second best. I want to encourage you to stay on task. Do not get distracted.

As an individual, your responsibility, your task, is to become more like Jesus Christ. That's your task. Our task as a church is to aid people on their journey. In other words, make disciples of Jesus Christ. Your task as an individual is get more like Jesus. Our task as a church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and not get distracted, not settle, and not fall. The writer of Hebrews says the way we do that is by fixing our eyes on Jesus. Don't lose sight. Don't get distracted. Don't settle. Jesus is the beginning and the ending of our faith journey.

Let us pray together. So, in the quietness of this time, I don't know how God has spoken to you, but however it is, right now is the time to settle that with God. Work that out with God. Make your resolve and your resolution with God and make your commitment to God right now, in the quietness of this moment.

Lord, right now in this moment it is very quiet as we contemplate our own faith. Some of us are bemoaning the fact that we have allowed sins and distractions and good stuff to derail us from Your purpose in our lives. Some of us have been burdened with things that now we need to begin and we need to do. Lord, keep us from getting distracted. Keep us on task. And, Lord, help us as individuals to become more like Jesus every day. And, as a church, help us to make disciples. In Christ's name, amen.