

## Faith Under Fire

10<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent. – 08/14//22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Hebrews 11:17-12:3 Pastor Keith Besel

vv.1-2a, **“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, looking to Jesus...”**.

### Introduction

✘ The title for this message is “Faith Under Fire”. But to what is that title referring? Is it talking about Faith that is being Fired Upon from some outside force or enemy? Or does it refer to Faith that is In The midst of The Flames; Faith that is enduring the relentless heat of trouble, pain, difficulty and more?

→ Well, I intentionally left it vague so that it would cover all of the above and even more, just as the preacher to the Hebrew Christians did in our text today. After listing a number of detailed examples from the heroes of the faith, he said in verse 32, “And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets...” who were all living examples of those with “Faith Under Fire”.

→ In 11:35-38 the preacher says, “Some were tortured. ... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated ... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (11:35–38). And those were the most faithful ones!

✘ Our Lutheran Fathers of faith wrote this in 1580 in one of our confessional statements known as the *Formula of Concord*, “We receive in this life only the firstfruit of the Spirit [Rom 8:23]. The new birth is not complete, but only begun in us. ... At one time [the Christian] is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed. At one time he is intense in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another time he is cold and weak” (FC SD II 68). Every faithful Christian fits that description – up and down in our faith; riding high with Jesus at times and fighting tooth and nail with the devil at other times. This then is “Faith Under Fire”.

✘ In our text today, chapter 12, says that everyone who lives by faith endures in order to reach the “finish line”, where we are joined together with Jesus; the One who gives each of us His victory.

→ It’s in this Christian “race” of faith here on earth; in this realm bound by time that God’s people receive blessings upon blessings – His providence and protection for our bodily needs; the forgiveness of sins; answers to our prayers; His peace and comfort, and His Fatherly guidance.

→ But we only reach that finish line through adversity, and it’s in that adversity – when we are “Under Fire”, that our text comes to us today to encourage us. It calls us all to consider those who endured suffering before us, so that just as they were able to attain the victory of Christ, so you and I, in our faith, will also prevail.

### I. Like the ancients, we face adversities and trials today

✘ There’s a reason that chapter 11 is called the “Hall of Faith” chapter. The preacher lays out a long list of what many people would call a Hall of Fame kind of list, including many of the most well-known people in the Old Testament. They include names like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Rahab, David, and many others; all men and women who suffered and whose faith was greatly tested.

→ So, is there anyone here today – give me a show of hands, who has also suffered – and I’m not talking about just suffering physically like you’ve stubbed your toe or have a headache because you stood up into a cupboard door or even because you are dealing with some kind of pain or disease like cancer or arthritis. No, the suffering that our text is talking about today is when the things of this earthly life have challenged or called your faith in God and His promises into question; when someone confronts you because of your faith; when those physical troubles I just talked about are now making you wonder if you still believe God exists or that Jesus is still with you; that He is actually coming back to take us to Paradise. How many of you have suffered with this kind of “Faith Under Fire”?

✘ If we’re honest, every one of us has, and is suffering in this way. Like Abraham, we too are asked to trust God and His promises to the point that it means we must make very real; very difficult sacrifices in our priorities, schedules and desires; in our friendships and families because of our faith.

→ Like Moses, we too either have or will be persecuted by the Pharaoh’s and Egyptians of this world; the authorities or the cultural expectations of what it means to be a success or what time requirements are expected by your extended family or what compromises you must make to your commitment to God’s Word or else you risk losing your friends, or not being on the team or harming your relationship with your co-workers or losing a chance at that promotion or keeping the peace at home – all of that risk just because of your faith in Jesus.

→ Like those believers before us in Scripture, you and I folks; we may have to forego that wealth; those comforts and friendships; the perks in this earthly life in order to keep our God and our Savior Jesus first! And it may be scary or painful or just plain contrary to what our sinful nature wants us to do, but friends there is only one God and Father and Savior of us all, and in the end He is the only One that really matters. He’s the one who determines what is good and right and true for us as His sons and daughters of faith. And that means that enduring difficulty to follow Him is worth it!

→ Will we fall short? Will we give in to the fire and the flames? Yes, we will – and we have. But with God’s help we keep fighting and we hang tough and we cling to Him all the same – in faith!

## **II. God’s faithfulness to the saints means He’s faithful to us.**

✘ Because, you see, the most important lesson for us to learn from the examples God has given to us in the pages of His holy Word are not about their faith but about God’s faithfulness to them and to us now today.

→ As we see from these great men and women in Scripture, they believed, as Abraham did, that God could raise the dead (11:19); that He offers greater riches in the promise of His coming Christ (11:26); and that, in the future, He alone, as verse 40 says, is the One who provides something far better and more perfect than anything that this world could ever offer.

✘ Verse 27 reminds us that all of God’s promises were made through the One who was at that time for those people “invisible”.

→ But you and I now have an added benefit that those believers in the Old Testament did not. We know that God has now become visible in the flesh and blood of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

→ He’s the One who endured, above all other humans, the greatest suffering and adversity; the greatest persecution and testing and shame in His death on the cross.

→ And it is only by His sacrifice and His victory over death when He rose from the grave that you and I now have the assurance of all of God's promises being fulfilled.

- ✘ God promised it all to those ancient believers so many centuries in advance. And because they embraced God's promise and trusted in His deliverance and faithfulness, they then prevailed against impossible odds like the waters of the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army or an armed giant before the boy David, and they saw how God's love and faithfulness and power saw them through their adversities.

### III. God delivers us in faith, now and in eternity.

- ✘ "Therefore" says the preacher when he starts us out in chapter 12. "Therefore" is the one word that means what comes next is the conclusion, the main point, the reason for us to pay very close attention to the great cloud of witnesses he has just placed before us as examples of faith.

→ And then he follows up the "therefore" clause with two "let us" statements. Here's where the rubber meets the road for every one of us. God's spokesman is taking a hold of your collar and turning your eyes and ears and every one of your senses upon what he is about to say. When Scripture says, "let us.." it's saying this is what God wants us all to do or say or be about as the children whom He has redeemed from the clutches of Satan himself; as the ones whose sins He has drowned in the water of your baptism and cleansed and raised to new life in the gift of His Holy Spirit when He gave us that free gift of faith at the same time.

→ So now it's time to put that faith into action! All of that is packed up in those three little words, "Therefore...let us..."

- ✘ So, every one of us here right now – it's time to think of all of the things that you consider to be of great importance in this life; the activities you love to do; the people you build your schedule around; the passions that you obsess about and the things that bring you the greatest joy in this life.

→ Unless any of those are directly connected to Jesus and your Christian faith, God says to each one of us now in chapter 12:1, "...let us...lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely..". This is where the "Faith Under Fire" begins folks; where God is calling us to put all of those other things that consume us in this world "aside". Let go of them. Rebuke them for turning our focus away from Jesus and His will for us. Why?

→ That's the second "let us" call to action in verses 1-2, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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". That's why we need to put all of our earthly-focused things "aside"; to make room for Jesus; so that we can focus upon Him above everything else; so that we can "run" in the race of life that He has in mind for us to run.

- ✘ It's the same thing that He called those ancient believers to do. And now we know from their lives how powerfully and faithfully God worked in and among them to do amazing and miraculous and mighty things.

→ He protected them when they were "under fire" – being attacked by armies and enemies of all kinds, bringing them through the fire and into His victory. He strengthened them to endure the flames of suffering and difficulty of all kinds, showing them that even when it might seem like He has left them it is only because they don't see that He is beneath them, holding them in His righteous right hand and bringing them in the end to Finish Line of eternal life before "the throne of God" (v.2). It reminds us of Luther's Morning Prayer when we pray: "For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things".

- ✘ The evidence is abundantly clear from the examples of those laid out before us in Scripture – even in those who were killed because of their faith. God’s unending grace does not fail. As promised, God brings us all to the blessed hope and victory over sin, death, and devil in His Son, the “founder and perfecter of our faith”, Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

- ✘ So my dear friends, even as your faith in Christ is a “Faith Under Fire”, even as you struggle, feel pressure, suffer and are tempted to forego God’s commands, or doubt His promises, “let us” always look to Jesus. Look at all that He has endured already in your place. Look at the examples of those believers before us and all that they endured because of Jesus and see how they remained faithful only because of God’s faithfulness first to them.

➔ Yes, it is always and only about Jesus – this life we live and the certain future that we have. Focusing upon Him as the Finish Line of all that we are and everything that we do, you and I – we have God’s promise that we know has already come true. Forgiveness and life and salvation forever in Jesus! Amen.