

“This timely and accessible book will inspire and encourage Christians everywhere to persevere in their marathon race to future glory. Above all it exhorts us to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus, who is the only hero who can save us and who has set us the supreme example to follow.”

JOHN STEVENS, National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC)

“After over 30 years in Christian ministry, Richard Coekin understands the Bible, his local church and the culture. He sees the need for Christians to internalise the great chapter on faith, Hebrews 11, in order to have the resilience they’ll need in a culture that is increasingly hostile. An incredibly timely book.”

RICO TICE, Senior Minister (Evangelism), All Souls Langham Place, London; Co-founder, Christianity Explored Ministries

“This book inspired me to stop faffing around and to live out my faith whatever the cost as I wait for the glorious future that Christ has won for me. I pray it does the same for you.”

LIZZY SMALLWOOD, London Women’s Convention

“The author of this book says that to live without faith is to live not at all. Each chapter vividly unfolds as if one were looking at a painting. This age we live in is as fierce, sharp and dangerous for many Christians as the time of the writer of Hebrews. So, this book is desperately needed.”

NAM JOON KIM, Pastor, Yullin Church, Korea

“This book on Hebrews 11 is not only gripping to read; it is also simultaneously deeply encouraging and challenging. It is thoughtful and well-illustrated, and packed with gold!”

WILLIAM TAYLOR, Rector, St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London

“This book is another example of Richard’s passion and refreshing ability to make the Bible come alive. In a world of celebrities, it is so important for every Christian to understand that God uses ordinary people—people who are largely unnoticed in the affairs of the world—to accomplish his eternal purposes. If you find yourself tired or discouraged in serving God, this is the book for you! I cannot recommend it more highly!”

MARTIN MORRISON, Pastor, Christ Church Midrand,
Johannesburg, SA; Chairman, The Gospel Coalition, Africa

“A gem of a book that will build and strengthen the church. Achingly relevant, heartwarming, challenging and inspiring—the perfect antidote for my pandemic-weary faith.”

LINDA ALLCOCK, Author, *Head, Heart, Hands and Deeper Still*

“This is a book written to encourage and refresh. It does that but also much more. By stepping us through the pastorally rich drama of Hebrews 11, this book has the power to transform and change a life—in a good way! It is the product of decades of teaching the Bible to real people dealing with real issues in the real world. It is engaging, pastorally sensitive, thoughtful, provocative and timely. Just what we need.”

ANDREW HEARD, Senior Minister, EV Church, New South
Wales; Chairman, Australian FIEC

“A delightful book, seasoned with pastoral wisdom and personal experience, peppered with well-chosen illustrations, encouraging Christians under pressure everywhere to live and speak and love with salty faith.”

JOHNNY JUCKES, President, Oak Hill College, London

RICHARD COEKIN

FAITH

for

LIFE

The logo features a stylized, curved line above the text "thegoodbook".
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This book is dedicated to my dear friend

DAVE CLARKE

(1963 - 2020)

who lived by faith and went home early.

*"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4 v 7)*

You talked constantly of the joy of being with Jesus in heaven, which made you such a wonderfully encouraging man to be with and which motivated your investment in so much gospel ministry, beginning with your inspirational family. I miss you, mate—but look forward to seeing you soon.

Faith for Life

Inspiration From The Ordinary Heroes Of Hebrews 11

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CONTENTS

Preface	7
Introducing the Hebrews	11
Faith for life is...	
1. Confident	27
2. Commended	43
3. Obedient	59
4. Patient	75
5. Sacrificial	89
6. Aspirational	103
7. Courageous	117
8. Self-denying	131
9. Empowering	147
10. Enduring	161
11. Perfected in Jesus	173

PREFACE

In April 2019 I stood among huge, jostling crowds lining the Embankment in London amidst a cacophony of noise. I was there to cheer my son along as he ran the London Marathon with a friend to raise support for disadvantaged kids.

It wasn't the elite athletes who were most impressive—bounding along like speedy gazelles. It was the charity runners—staggering around the 26-mile course from Blackheath to Buckingham Palace for countless great causes, often in ridiculous costumes. It was so humbling to watch their commitment. And moving to hear their supporters bellowing encouragements with all manner of horns and rattles and whistles. And what was motivating the colossal effort of so many thousands of ordinary runners? The finishing line! The satisfaction of completing the course; the triumph of collecting a winner's medal; the joy of helping some people in need. Unsurprisingly, it's the support of the crowds that apparently keeps exhausted runners going through the inevitable muscle and joint fatigue, dehydration and "hitting the wall".

The London Marathon serves as a metaphor for the Christian life. For, while it's an incredible privilege to know God through Jesus, Christians get weary, face opposition and feel discouraged. We certainly want the everlasting satisfaction, triumph and joy of the finish line in heaven. But the personal disappointment of apparently unanswered prayers, the increasingly fierce opposition of Western "identity politics" or the costly grind of commitment to our local church can suck the joy out of us—and sometimes we just feel like giving up. Like those London Marathon runners, we need the support of our spiritual family and friends as they rally around and cheer us on.

There's one spectacular chapter in the Bible through which our Father in heaven does this more wonderfully than any other. It's the famous Hebrews chapter 11—often described as the Bible's "Hall of Fame" (though, as we'll see, it's much more besides).

This amazing portion of Scripture offers powerful encouragements for weary, beleaguered and discouraged Christians. It's like that crowd lining the London Embankment: characters from Bible history, many generations of our spiritual family, who have all completed the course themselves, cheering us on. They manage our expectations with refreshing honesty in a world of lies and spin. They remind us of the glory and blessing that await us at the finishing line in the kindness of God and the happiness of heaven. They inspire us to keep living by faith in the gospel—to endure through the exhaustion, opposition and discouragement that we

will all face at some time. They really can encourage us to keep going.

This book is the distillation of many years of teaching this extraordinary chapter to ordinary Christian believers in need of refreshment. It could be ideal for private devotional reading—or perhaps as holiday reading. It could be a timely gift for a discouraged Christian friend, or as background reading to a series of small-group studies in Hebrews 11.

However you use this book, my prayer is that God will graciously use it to encourage and empower you to keep running—living by faith in the promises of God and empowered by faith—for life.

INTRODUCING THE HEBREWS

Shrinking back from living by faith

Remember those earlier days after you received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay." And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back."

But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

(Hebrews 10 v 32-39)

When my wife and I visited Marrakesh in Morocco a few years ago, in one of the bustling *souks* we discovered a pile of wooden crates full of chameleons. As you probably know, chameleons are amazing lizards. By controlling the bloodflow to their skin, they can adapt their colouration to become camouflaged against any background so as to be invisible and safe from predators.

It struck me that Christians can easily become afflicted with what we might call the “chameleon syndrome”. Jesus plainly said:

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man [Jesus] will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory. (Mark 8 v 38)

Christians should not be hiding their faith. We should not become spiritual chameleons: desperately trying to fit into the culture of this world to remain camouflaged and safe from predators who might expose and condemn our faith. But many of us are under immense pressure to do just that.

Perhaps we used to be distinctively Christian—holding to our biblical convictions and looking for opportunities to be respectfully evangelistic. But now we’re wary, anxious or even afraid of being discovered. And nobody on our building site or hospital ward or in our college class or city office would ever guess we were a Christian. We’ve become camouflaged—like chameleons—shrinking back from public loyalty to Christ.

There are many reasons why Christians hide their faith. It could be because of a weariness verging on

cynicism after years of social rejection for following Jesus. Or it may be that during the Covid-19 pandemic, with churches unable to meet physically and ministries forced online, while more outsiders have been watching church on YouTube, others of us have quietly drifted away. Or it may be the stress of keeping our jobs where we're bound by official or unofficial codes of conduct that inhibit or even forbid sharing our faith. Whatever the reasons, many who were once openly Christian will be tempted to hide, to shrink back from distinctive Christian living except on Sundays, becoming indistinguishable from unbelievers during the week—like chameleons hidden from predators.

Certainly in some countries the consequences of being openly Christian can bring economic or even physical suffering. An Iranian man at our church who converted from Islam to follow Jesus showed me the medical report with accompanying photographs detailing his brutal physical tortures and lasting psychiatric damage when he was arrested for trying to evangelise his community.

In the West the opposition has, until recently, been generally subtle. Perhaps pitying parents have asked us to stop talking about Jesus; or scornful atheistic friends have unfriended us on Facebook because they're tired of our invitations to church; or work colleagues have expressed frustration with our morality, declaring us to be bigoted and dangerous.

But the opposition is getting more hostile in Western cultures. Our children can be humiliated at school for the biblical view of marriage we've taught them; university

Christian Unions find their speakers “cancelled” because they are considered homophobic by their Student Union; Christian doctors and teachers can find themselves facing a disciplinary process for offering to pray with a patient or student. Christian employees are refused their traditional carol service after complaints from humanists. Or perhaps we’ve been sent for “diversity training” for quietly expressing our reservations about championing Stonewall.

Trying to navigate between just causes such as racial equality in the aftermath of the appalling murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020—and more dubious agendas such as gender fluidity—is fraught with problems for most of us. We’re told that Christian morality is no longer the mainstream ethic of our society (despite most of our culture’s principles of justice and equity having biblical origins). We find ourselves increasingly caught up in the bewildering efforts of governments, institutions, businesses and educators to comply with the demands of the tidal wave of causes ferociously competing for preferment on grounds of historic victimisation.

Any perceived divergence by us from swiftly evolving political correctness is met with vengeful rage on social media. It’s hardly surprising that many Christians feel pressured to shrink back from public loyalty to Jesus and abandon all efforts to initiate evangelistic conversations—indeed, to behave increasingly like chameleons.

HEBREWS WAS WRITTEN FOR CHRISTIANS UNDER PRESSURE

The letter to the Hebrews was written for discouraged Jewish Christians, probably living in Rome, afflicted with the chameleon syndrome. They were not tempted to go back to Judaism. They were tempted to hide their faith.

We don't know who the author was. But he was clearly a deeply learned pastor who knew his Old Testament and loved his readers very much. Hebrews is his beautifully written extended sermon expounding a series of Old Testament texts. He calls his readers to keep listening to what God has spoken in the gospel of his Son, Jesus Christ. He combines dire warnings of judgment upon any who shrink back from Christ with warm encouragements of lasting heavenly blessing for all who remain loyal.

Eleven times in Hebrews he describes God's revelation in Jesus as "better" than anything in the Old Testament: a *better word* in the gospel than came from angels, Moses or Joshua (chapters 1 – 4); a *better priest* in heaven than in any temple on earth (chapters 5 – 7); a *better covenant* arrangement with God, based on forgiveness rather than on law we cannot keep (chapter 8), established by Jesus' *better sacrifice* as our true substitute on the cross, which animal sacrifices could never be (chapters 9 – 10). Jesus is *far better* than the best alternatives.

The author of Hebrews urgently pleads with his readers to "pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard" (2 v 1); "see to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart

that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily” (3 v 12-13); “let us draw near to God... let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ... let us consider how we may spur one another on ... not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another” (10 v 22-25) and now in our passage to “persevere” (10 v 36).

Hebrews calls weary Christians then and now to persevere and not shrink back, for which purpose the writer has penned one of the most powerfully encouraging passages in the whole Bible: the famous Hebrews 11.

Chapter 11 is a reminder from Old Testament history of how God has enabled his people down the centuries to endure by faith in him. It celebrates the faith of our Christian ancestors—our spiritual family. First from Genesis in the lives of the “ancients”, it looks at Abel, Enoch and Noah; and then the great “patriarchs”—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Next the writer explores the faith-driven choices of Moses in Exodus, and then speeds up with Joshua, the judges and the prophets. The author aims to inspire his readers (including us) with these famous characters from Bible history whom he calls “such a great cloud of witnesses” (12 v 1) and who are cheering us on.

He’s not suggesting that they’re watching us from heaven. He’s saying they encourage us from the pages of Scripture. And they’re not a “great” cloud because they’re so marvellous (many were not) but because there are so many of them.

Chapter 11 is sometimes unhelpfully described as “heroes of faith”. Actually, they’re not a select group of heroes at all. Indeed, it’s hard to remember anyone in the Old Testament who’s left out! The whole point is that God has *always* empowered persevering faith in his people. The author is demonstrating what God can enable all his readers to do by faith. He is showing what God can empower us to do.

So he doesn’t just select the best people. Abraham and Moses certainly did make some remarkable decisions because of their faith. But there are plenty of others named who were very unimpressive, or even disgraceful, people. Instead of selecting heroic judges such as Othniel, Ehud and Deborah, he chooses famous disappointments like Gideon and Barak, who were utterly feeble, and Samson and Jephthah, who were depressingly shallow. The author is not describing the faith of an elite few. He’s selecting some big moments when God enabled faith in the lives of very ordinary believers down the centuries—not to make heroes of them but to remind his readers of how God has enabled his people, including screw-ups like most of us, to persevere through all sorts of difficulty by faith. This chapter is not about superhuman faith. It’s about the kind of faith God has always given his people from the very beginning.

To illustrate from the walls of many schools: Hebrews 11 is not an honours board for especially heroic champions. It’s the wall covered with class photos from every year since the school began. Chapter 11 is not about heroes of faith. It’s about God empowering ordinary people like us!

Which brings us to another vital observation. There are no chapter divisions in the original New Testament documents. The list in chapter 11 reaches its crescendo in Jesus, described in 12 v 1-3. The author uses rhetorical skills such as quickening the repetition of the phrase “by faith” and adding lists of examples without conjunctions to build the excitement of the passage towards Jesus. For the whole message of Hebrews is that Jesus is *better* than all. Jesus is our *Hero of faith*. Everything that faith enabled the people of chapter 11 to do finds its *perfection* in Jesus. The author has told his readers in 10 v 36 that “you need to persevere”, so his climactic description of Jesus reads, “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (12 v 1-2). He’s calling them supremely to fix their eyes not on the flawed characters of chapter 11 but on Jesus, whose endurance of the cross is the champion example of living by faith.

INTRODUCING THE HEBREWS

The passage immediately before chapter 11 helps clarify the situation of the Hebrew readers to whom chapter 11 was written, which is so important for understanding what the author means and for drawing appropriate applications. They have previously endured costly persecution:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light [of gospel truth], when you *endured* in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other

times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. (Hebrews 10 v 32-33)

Many of the readers were veteran believers who had courageously maintained public loyalty to Christ through a “great conflict” (v 32) or struggle: probably the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Emperor Claudius in AD 49 because of rioting about *Chrestus*, presumably Jesus Christ. Being “exposed to insult” means suffering public humiliation, and “persecution” implies physical suffering for Jesus—though not yet to the point of shedding blood (12 v 4, as many Christian were later cruelly killed in Roman arenas for entertainment). Imagine the physical and emotional trauma involved, especially for the children.

When they’d first experienced the joy of forgiveness in Christ, they’d been zealous for the gospel. But their enthusiasm was draining away. For it isn’t only new believers who are tempted to hide; experienced Christians grow weary and feel discouraged too. Perhaps some of us are respected in our church because of our zeal in the past. But in truth we haven’t commended Jesus or invited anyone to church for a long while, let alone brought anyone to Christ. Perhaps we can remember how we were once urgent in prayer for world mission, listening to God in his word every day, making radical sacrifices of time and money for our church—but not for some years now.

I’m an experienced church pastor now, and I know this temptation to rely on past exploits is very real for church leaders too. But living by faith is not living in the past. It means *living by faith today*—not winding down to wither away but stepping up to make our later years the most

productive ones for the gospel. Like in the conversation I've just had with a man from our church who's been able to retire early—not to play golf and bridge but to do some theological training to invest more time in his prison ministry and serve in one of our missional community groups. Hebrews 11 will be vital for mature believers tempted to *retire* from living by faith just as much as for younger believers tempted to *fear* living by faith.

In the past, these Hebrews had joyfully accepted the loss of their property because of their confidence in heaven:

You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions [in the new creation of heaven].

(Hebrews 10 v 34)

They'd previously sympathised with believers in prison and without self-pity had joyfully "accepted" (literally "welcomed") the seizure of their property—presumably from looting or eviction. Imagine them sitting in their ransacked homes after the violent mob has left, gathering terrified family members together to thank God in prayer for the privilege of suffering for Jesus. How could they "welcome" such a cost? Because they were looking forward to their glorious inheritance in heaven!

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of
righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.