

Living by Faith, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Faith That Conquers and Faith That Suffers

Hebrews 11:32–40

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson carries some of the heaviest doctrinal freight in the entire study, because it directly confronts one of the most popular and most damaging errors of our age: the idea that genuine faith should secure earthly deliverance, health, wealth, and a comfortable life. Hebrews 11:32–40 makes that idea impossible to hold. The passage deliberately falls into two halves. The first (verses 32 through 35a) celebrates spectacular victories won by faith. The second (verses 35b through 38) describes equally faithful believers who were tortured, mocked, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, killed by the sword, and driven into the wilderness. The single most important interpretive observation is that the inspired writer applies the same word, faith, to both groups. The conquerors and the sufferers stand together in the same hall of faith. Faith did not fail the martyrs; God simply ordained a different outcome for them, and their faithfulness in suffering is presented as no less glorious than the conquerors' victories. Indeed, it is of the afflicted, not the triumphant, that Scripture says, 'of whom the world was not worthy.'

The doctrinal climax comes in verses 39 and 40. Every one of these saints, the victorious and the martyred, was 'commended through their faith,' yet 'did not receive what was promised.' God had provided 'something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' Here is the unity of the people of God across both covenants: the faithful of the Old Testament and the believers of the New are made perfect together, and only in Christ. The 'something better' is the better covenant secured by the blood of Jesus, the substance toward which all their faith was reaching. This passage refutes the prosperity gospel root and branch, and it grounds the believer's hope not in earthly comfort but in the finished work of Christ and the resurrection to come.

The spiritual-formation aim is to reshape how your class defines victory and how they interpret their own suffering. Many sincere believers secretly fear that hardship is a verdict against their faith. This lesson should free them from that fear and give them a sturdier, more honest faith, one that can stand whether God rescues them or asks them to be faithful through the fire. Teach tenderly here, for many in the room are carrying unanswered prayers and unhealed wounds. The goal is not to glorify suffering for its own sake, but to help each student trust the God who is faithful in both the conquering and the suffering, and to fix their hope on the resurrection and the better country that Christ has secured.

Question 1

Student Question: *After naming Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, the writer says that 'through faith' they 'conquered kingdoms, enforced justice,*

obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions' (Hebrews 11:32–34). What do these verses teach about what faith accomplished in these saints, and why is it significant that their victories are credited to faith rather than to their own strength or ability?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by noticing how quickly the writer moves. He says he does not have time to tell all the stories, and then he sweeps through judges, a king, a prophet, and the prophets in a single breath. The point is not biography but pattern. Each of these very different people, in very different circumstances, accomplished what they did through one common thing: faith. The grammar matters. It was 'through faith' that they conquered, not merely through courage, genius, or military skill.

Walk briefly through the catalog of victories so the class feels their weight: kingdoms conquered, justice enforced, promises obtained, the mouths of lions stopped (Daniel), the violence of fire quenched (the three Hebrews), the edge of the sword escaped, weakness turned to strength, armies routed, and the dead raised (the widows of Elijah and Elisha). These are real, dramatic deliverances, and we should not flatten them. Faith really does sometimes shut the lions' mouths.

Press the significance of crediting these to faith rather than ability. Several of these men were deeply flawed. Samson was impulsive and self-indulgent. Jephthah made a reckless vow. Barak hesitated. David sinned grievously. Yet they are remembered here for their faith, because faith lays hold of God's strength, not our own. The phrase 'made strong out of weakness' (verse 34) is the key. The glory belongs to God, who works through trusting people, even imperfect ones.

Set up the turn that is coming. This first half is gloriously true, but it is only half the chapter. If we stop here we will build a lopsided theology in which faith always wins on earth. Tell the class plainly that the same writer is about to apply the same word to people who lost everything. Hold the victories with one hand, and get ready to hold the suffering with the other.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith as the common thread uniting very different saints and circumstances
- Victories credited to faith laying hold of God's power, not human ability
- God working through flawed and imperfect believers
- Strength made perfect out of weakness (Hebrews 11:34; compare 2 Corinthians 12:9–10)
- The danger of building a lopsided theology from the victories alone
- Real, dramatic deliverances as a genuine work of faith

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the writer credit these victories to faith rather than to the heroes' talents?
- What does 'made strong out of weakness' tell us about where the power really comes from?
- How does it encourage you that God worked mightily through deeply flawed people?

Question 2

Student Question: *When you imagine a life of strong faith, what does it tend to look like in your mind? How closely does that picture match the conquering heroes of these verses, and where might your picture need correcting?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gently surfaces the assumptions your students carry, often without realizing it. Many of us picture strong faith as a life that goes well: prayers answered, problems solved, a believer visibly blessed. The conquering heroes of verses 32 through 34 fit that picture comfortably, which is exactly why we love these stories and tend to stop reading there.

Invite honesty without shame. It is natural to be drawn to the victories. The aim is not to make anyone feel guilty for hoping God will deliver them, but to widen the picture so it includes the second half of the chapter. A faith that can only imagine winning will be shaken when the losses come.

Begin pointing forward. Tell the class to hold their picture loosely, because in a few verses the chapter is going to add faces to the gallery that look nothing like victory, and call them faith too. The correction is not to throw out the conquerors but to make room beside them for the sufferers, so that our idea of strong faith is large enough to hold both.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hidden assumptions that equate strong faith with a comfortable, successful life
- The natural attraction to stories of victory and deliverance
- The need to widen our picture of faith to include suffering saints
- The danger of a faith that can only imagine winning
- Holding our expectations of God loosely and honestly

Discussion Prompts

- What does a life of strong faith look like in your imagination?
- Where did that picture come from, and how complete is it?
- What would it mean to make room for suffering in your idea of faith?

Question 3

Student Question: *Beginning in verse 35, the tone shifts: 'Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.' What does it mean that these believers refused release that they could have taken, and what does their choice reveal about where their hope was fixed?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center the class on the striking detail: release was offered, and they refused it. This was not suffering they could not avoid. They could have walked free by renouncing their faith or compromising their obedience, and they chose torture instead. The likely background is the Maccabean martyrs and others who would not deny God even under torment. Their refusal is the hinge of the whole second half of the chapter.

Ask why anyone would make such a choice, and let the text answer: 'so that they might rise again to a better life.' Their hope was not fixed on this world at all. They had weighed temporary release against the resurrection, and they judged the resurrection worth more than their own lives. This is faith doing its defining work, giving present substance to an unseen future (Hebrews 11:1).

Draw the contrast with the prosperity instinct. A theology that treats deliverance as the proof of faith cannot account for believers who deliberately turned deliverance down. These martyrs show that the goal of faith was never merely a better life now; it was a better resurrection then. Their eyes were on something the world could not give and the torturers could not take.

Bring it near. Few of us will face literal torture, but all of us face the daily temptation to take the easy release of compromise. Their example asks whether our hope is fixed firmly enough on the world to come that we can say no to an easy escape that would cost us our faithfulness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Believers refusing release that would have cost them their faithfulness
- Hope fixed on the resurrection rather than on this present life
- Faith giving present substance to an unseen future (Hebrews 11:1)
- The contrast between a 'better resurrection' and mere earthly deliverance
- The everyday temptation to take the easy release of compromise

Discussion Prompts

- Why would these believers refuse a release they could have accepted?
- What does their choice tell you about where their hope was anchored?
- Where are you tempted to take an easy escape that would cost your faithfulness?

Question 4

Student Question: *Be honest about your own heart: when following God becomes costly or painful, how strong is the pull to take the easier way out? Where do you feel that pull most right now?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a searching personal question, so set a tone of grace. Everyone in the room knows the pull toward the easier way; the martyrs of verse 35 felt it too, which is what made their refusal

an act of faith rather than indifference. Naming the pull honestly is not weakness; it is the first step toward standing firm.

Help students locate where the pull actually shows up. For most of us it is not torture but smaller compromises: staying silent when we should speak, cutting a corner to avoid conflict, dropping a conviction to keep someone's approval, easing off an obedience that has grown costly. The easy way out is usually quiet and reasonable-sounding.

Point to the source of strength. We do not resist the pull by gritting our teeth but by fixing our hope where the martyrs fixed theirs, on the better life to come, and by leaning on the God who makes us strong out of weakness. Encourage the class that Christ Himself faced the pull to avoid the cross and chose the Father's will for the joy set before Him (Hebrews 12:2). We follow a Savior who knows the weight of that choice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest acknowledgment of the pull toward the easier way
- Costly faithfulness in small, everyday compromises, not only in crisis
- Hope in the life to come as the strength to stand firm
- Strength out of weakness as a gift, not mere willpower
- Christ as the Savior who faced and overcame the same pull (Hebrews 12:2)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you feel the pull toward the easier way most strongly right now?
- What small compromises tempt you more than dramatic ones?
- How does fixing your hope on the world to come help you stand firm?

Question 5

Student Question: *Verses 36 through 38 describe believers who were mocked, flogged, chained, stoned, sawn in two, and left destitute and afflicted, wandering in deserts and caves. Why is it important to see that Scripture places these sufferers in the same hall of faith as the conquerors, under the very same word, 'by faith'?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Make the central observation unmistakable. The writer does not begin a new section called 'the failures of faith.' He keeps going under the same heading. The people who were sawn in two and the people who shut the lions' mouths are listed in the same breath, commended for the same thing. This is one of the most important truths in the chapter, and the class should leave certain of it.

Linger on the catalog of suffering so it is not abstract. Mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, stoning (as Zechariah was stoned, and as tradition says of others), being sawn in

two (as tradition says of Isaiah), killed with the sword, wandering in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, homeless in deserts and mountains and caves. These were not nominal believers under judgment; they were faithful people whom the world drove out.

Draw the doctrinal conclusion plainly. If suffering saints are credited with the same faith as conquering saints, then suffering is not evidence of weak faith or divine displeasure. The difference between the two groups was never the strength of their trust; it was the sovereign purpose of God, who delivered some and sustained others through what He did not remove. Both outcomes are faith.

Apply it pastorally. Many believers silently grade themselves as second-class because their story looks more like verse 37 than verse 33. Tell them clearly: heaven does not grade that way. The martyr and the conqueror stand on the same honor roll. Faithfulness through suffering is not the consolation prize of faith; it is faith in its fullest flower.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Suffering saints listed under the same word, 'by faith,' as the conquerors
- Suffering not as evidence of weak faith or divine displeasure
- The difference between the groups lying in God's purpose, not their faith
- Faithfulness through suffering honored equally with faithfulness in victory
- Pastoral comfort for those whose story looks like loss rather than triumph
- The historical reality of the persecuted faithful across the ages

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that the sufferers are called 'faith' just like the conquerors?
- What does this say to someone who feels their hardship means God is displeased?
- How does this reshape the way you think about believers who suffer greatly?

Question 6

Student Question: *When you have walked through a season of suffering, were you tempted to wonder whether God was displeased with you or whether your faith had somehow failed? How does this passage speak to that fear?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Approach this question tenderly, because nearly everyone in the room has lived it. The fear that suffering means God is angry or that our faith has failed is one of the heaviest burdens a believer can carry, and it often goes unspoken. Give people room to admit it without rushing to fix it.

Let the passage do the comforting. The believers of verses 36 through 38 suffered horribly and were commended for their faith in the same breath. Their suffering was not a verdict against them; it was the path God ordained for faithful people. Help your students hear that their own

seasons of suffering do not move them out of the hall of faith; if borne in trust, they place them squarely within it.

Guard against two ditches. On one side is the lie that suffering always means we have done something wrong or believed too weakly. On the other is the cold notion that suffering does not matter. The truth honors both: suffering is real and painful, and it is not a sign of God's rejection. Encourage the class to bring their unanswered prayers honestly to God, as the psalmists did, while trusting that He has not abandoned them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The common fear that suffering signals God's displeasure
- Suffering as a path God ordains for the faithful, not a verdict against them
- Comfort that hardship does not move us out of the hall of faith
- Avoiding both the lie that suffering means failure and the coldness that dismisses it
- Bringing unanswered prayers honestly to God in trust

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever feared that your suffering meant God was displeased with you?
- How does this passage answer that fear?
- What unanswered prayer do you need to bring honestly to God right now?

Question 7

Student Question: *Of the suffering saints the writer says, 'of whom the world was not worthy' (Hebrews 11:38). Why does Scripture reserve this remarkable statement for the afflicted and homeless rather than for the mighty and victorious, and what does this reveal about how God measures a life?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to the placement of this phrase, because it overturns our instincts. We would expect 'of whom the world was not worthy' to crown the conquerors, the kings and giant-slayers. Instead it is laid like a wreath on the destitute, the afflicted, the homeless who hid in caves. Heaven's highest commendation in this chapter goes to those the world counted as nothing.

Unfold what it means. The world judged these people as failures, even as garbage to be expelled. God's verdict was the opposite: the world was not good enough to keep them. The very people society discarded were treasures too precious for an unworthy world. This is the great reversal that runs all through Scripture, where the last are first and the despised are honored.

Show how this exposes God's measure of a life. God does not weigh a life by its comfort, its security, its visible success, or its standing in the eyes of others. He weighs it by faith and faithfulness. A life the world calls wasted may be, in heaven's accounting, a life of surpassing worth. This is profoundly freeing for believers tempted to measure themselves by worldly scales.

Connect it to Christ, who is the supreme example. The world was not worthy of Him either, and it cast Him out and crucified Him. To be unwelcome in a fallen world is not a mark of failure but often a mark of belonging to God. Let this lift the eyes of any student who feels small or overlooked.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Heaven's highest commendation given to the afflicted, not the mighty
- The great reversal: the world's rejects as God's treasures
- God measuring a life by faith and faithfulness, not comfort or status
- Freedom from measuring ourselves by worldly scales
- Christ Himself rejected by a world not worthy of Him

Discussion Prompts

- Why is 'the world was not worthy' said of sufferers rather than conquerors?
- What does this reveal about how God measures the worth of a life?
- How does this free you from measuring yourself by the world's standards?

Question 8

Student Question: *Where in your own life are you quietly measuring success by the standards of comfort, security, or the approval of others? What would it look like this week to let God redefine what a winning life actually is?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the great reversal of verse 38 toward each person's heart. Most of us absorb the world's scoreboard without noticing: we feel successful when life is comfortable, secure, and admired, and we feel like failures when it is hard, uncertain, and overlooked. Name that scoreboard gently so people can see it operating in themselves.

Help students get specific. The world's measure shows up in where we feel pride and where we feel shame, in what we are tempted to hide, in the milestones we chase. Invite them to locate one concrete place where they are keeping score by comfort, security, or applause rather than by faithfulness.

Offer the better scoreboard. To let God redefine a winning life is to start asking a different question: not 'Is my life comfortable and admired?' but 'Am I trusting and obeying God?'

Encourage one practical step this week, perhaps releasing a goal that was really about approval, or counting as success a quiet act of faithfulness no one will see. Close with the reminder that God's 'well done' is the only verdict that finally matters.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world's scoreboard of comfort, security, and approval
- Recognizing where we feel pride and shame as a clue to what we worship
- Redefining success as trusting and obeying God
- Counting unseen faithfulness as genuine victory
- Living for God's 'well done' as the final verdict

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you quietly keeping score by comfort, security, or approval?
- What would change if faithfulness, not success, were your measure?
- What is one concrete step this week toward God's definition of winning?

Question 9

Student Question: *Hebrews 11:39-40 says, 'And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' All of these saints, the triumphant and the tortured alike, were 'commended through their faith,' yet none received the full promise in their lifetime. What does this teach us about whether faith guarantees earthly deliverance, comfort, or prosperity, and why is the popular idea that strong faith should bring health, wealth, and an easy life a serious distortion of the gospel? What does it mean that these Old Testament saints would be 'made perfect' only together with us, and how is that 'something better' found only in Christ and His better covenant?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, so give it the most time and care. Begin with the sweeping word 'all.' The verse gathers up every name in the chapter, the conquerors of verse 33 and the martyrs of verse 37, and says the same two things about all of them: they were commended through their faith, and they did not receive what was promised. That single sentence demolishes the notion that faith is a means to earthly reward. The most commended believers in Scripture died without receiving the promise in their lifetimes.

Confront the prosperity gospel directly and plainly, for it is one of the most widespread distortions of our day. The teaching that strong faith should produce health, wealth, success, and an easy life is not a minor exaggeration; it is a serious corruption of the gospel. It cannot survive contact with this passage. If faith guaranteed earthly deliverance, then the saints who were slain in two and the saints who 'did not receive what was promised' would stand as monuments to failed faith, when in fact Scripture holds them up as the very definition of faith.

The prosperity message also misreads what God has promised, dangling earthly comforts He never guaranteed and obscuring the eternal inheritance He did. And it is cruel, for it tells suffering believers that their pain proves a deficiency in their faith. The cross of Christ and the catalog of Hebrews 11 together expose it as false.

Now open the glorious phrase 'something better for us.' The reason these saints did not yet receive the promise is not that God failed them but that He was saving the best until the fullness of time. The 'something better' is Christ Himself and the better covenant established by His blood. All the faith of the Old Testament was reaching forward toward a Redeemer it could not yet see clearly. The promises they trusted find their yes in Jesus. The better covenant, the better sacrifice, the better hope, and the better resurrection are all secured in Him, and apart from Him no one, in any age, is made perfect.

Press the stunning unity of God's people across both covenants: 'that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' The faithful of the Old Testament and the believers of the New are not two separate peoples with two separate destinies; they are one people of God, made perfect together and only in Christ. The patriarchs and prophets waited for what we have received in the gospel, and the goal of history is one redeemed people perfected together in the Lord. This refutes any scheme that splits God's purposes into competing programs or postpones His kingdom; the kingdom has come in Christ, who reigns now, and all the faithful of every age find their completion in Him and in the resurrection He guarantees.

Land the application where it counts. Faith is not a lever to pull for earthly comfort; it is trust in the God who has secured something far better in Christ. This frees believers from the false promise of prosperity and anchors their hope where it belongs, in the finished work of Jesus and the resurrection to come. We respond to that better covenant not by faith only but by the obedient faith the gospel calls for, hearing, believing, repenting, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27), then walking faithfully unto death (Revelation 2:10). The saints of old looked forward to Christ; we look back to Him and forward to His coming, and together we will be made perfect.

Keep the tone one of wonder and comfort. The God who held these saints through fire and sword did not shortchange them; He was keeping them for something better, that they and we might receive it together. That is a hope no earthly prosperity could ever rival.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith does not guarantee earthly deliverance, comfort, or prosperity
- The prosperity gospel exposed as a serious distortion of the true gospel
- All the saints commended through faith, yet not receiving the promise in their lifetimes
- The 'something better' as Christ Himself and the better covenant in His blood
- The unity of Old Testament and New Testament saints, made perfect together and only in Christ
- The kingdom established in Christ, who reigns now, against any postponed-kingdom scheme

- Obedient faith responding to the better covenant: believing, repenting, confessing, baptism into Christ, and faithfulness unto death (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Revelation 2:10)

Discussion Prompts

- If the most commended saints died without receiving the promise, what does that say about faith and earthly reward?
- Why is the prosperity gospel a serious distortion, and how does this passage refute it?
- What does it mean that the saints of every age are made perfect together and only in Christ?

Question 10

Student Question: *Looking back over all of Hebrews 11:32–40, the conquering and the suffering together, name one concrete way Jesus is using this passage to form you. What is He asking you to trust Him for, or to surrender to Him, whether He delivers you as you hope or calls you to be faithful through the fire?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole passage and turns it toward transformation. The chapter has shown faith conquering and faith suffering, both commended, both reaching toward the something better found in Christ. Now ask each student to name one concrete way the Lord is forming them through it, resisting the urge to settle for a vague resolution.

Help them hold the two halves together in their own life. For some, the call will be to trust God boldly for a deliverance and to keep praying with hope. For others, the call will be to surrender an outcome they cannot control and to be faithful through a fire God has not yet quenched. Both are faith. Encourage students to name which one fits their season and to make it specific.

Lift their eyes to Jesus, the destination of the whole study. He is the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross (Hebrews 12:1–2). He both conquered, rising victorious over death, and suffered, faithful unto death, so He meets every believer in both halves of this chapter. Spiritual formation is being shaped into His likeness, learning to trust the Father as He did. Close by praying over the specific things named, that whether in deliverance or in the fire, each student would be made more like Christ and kept for the something better He has secured.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding the conquering and the suffering together in one's own walk
- Faith expressed both in bold trust for deliverance and in faithful surrender
- Christ as author and perfecter of faith, who both conquered and suffered (Hebrews 12:1–2)
- Spiritual formation into the likeness of Christ as the aim of the study
- Hope kept for the 'something better' Christ has secured, in deliverance or in the fire

Discussion Prompts

- In your current season, is Jesus calling you to bold trust for deliverance or to faithful surrender?
- What is one concrete way this passage is forming you right now?
- How can this class pray for you, whether God delivers you or sustains you through the fire?