

Chapter One: The Mile

I can remember the first time I swam the mile in college. My coach asked me to swim it because no one else on the girl's team had volunteered. I'd never swum the mile in a race before. The mile is 66 laps in a short-course 25 yard competition pool. But I told Coach I'd do it.

I dove in at the gun. Around lap 20, I wanted to give up. Quit. But no matter how much it hurt, no matter how tired I was, I still had 46 laps to go. And quitting wasn't an option. My friends on the deck kept cheering me on, yelling at me to keep swimming. And so I did. I kept swimming, one arm after the other, breath after breath, turn after turn, my feet constantly kicking.

When I finally saw the red card signaling that it was my last lap, I was so relieved. When I out-touched the girl I was racing against and looked up at the clock, I saw that I had qualified for the championships at the end of the season. I was going to have to swim the mile again – and again, and again.

Over time, I came to love distance swimming. I swam the mile, the 1000 yard freestyle, and the 200 yard butterfly consistently in college, and I improved with practice. That doesn't mean that they were easy or that I never wanted to give up again, but that I kept at it, I kept on pushing forward. Enduring. Persevering.

Think of times in your life when you wanted to give up, to throw in the towel. What made you decide to give up or to keep going? Looking back, what can you learn from times that you quit and times that you persevered?

Swimming wasn't the only time in my life that I wanted to give up. There have been many others, as I'm sure you have more than one example as well.

Apparently, we're not the only ones. It seems that the people to whom Hebrews was written were in danger of giving up, of throwing in the towel. "Remember those earlier days after you

had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face 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 sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (Hebrews 10:32-34, NIV).

The people who were reading this letter – or hearing it, as these letters were typically read aloud in churches – were struggling with how to keep on keeping on. They were getting discouraged by suffering and persecution – so much so that the author tells them, ‘Look, guys, remember what you went through in the past? You made it through, even though it was terrible. So keep on keeping on, persevering through the suffering and persecution because we are of those who believe and are saved, not of those who shrink back and are destroyed (Hebrews 10:39, NIV). Keep the faith,’ he says. Then he tells them exactly what faith is, and gives them example after example of people who came before them who persevered through trial and storm to receive what God had promised them.

Faith Is

Read Hebrews 11:1. What other verses or phrases come to mind when you think about faith?

W.E. Vine says that faith encompasses “a firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth, a personal surrender to Him, and a conduct inspired by such surrender.”¹ Faith isn’t just belief or just giving our lives to Christ, or even just how we are living. It’s a combination of all three. Let’s take a look at these three aspects of faith.

1) A firm conviction

I remember a family vacation when I was a teenager. We had driven down to Florida from Ohio, and we were staying in a condominium. As happened with many of our vacations growing up, most of our days were nice weather, sunny and warm. But this time, our vacation was interrupted by a hurricane. I remember looking out the windows of the condo

as the wind blew and the rain fell, watching the palm trees blow over in the wind. Amazingly, they stayed rooted to the ground even though they were being bent to what appeared to be their breaking point.

The palm tree remained anchored, even when the rains came and the winds blew fiercely around them. To have a firm conviction is to be steadfast in what you believe, like a well-rooted palm tree in the midst of a hurricane. That doesn't mean that doubts won't come, or trials won't threaten to break you down. Having faith means standing firm in the midst of the wind and the rain, holding fast to your anchor.

Faith involves believing, but it is more than that. Our believing in faith has eternal meaning, but only when it is transformed by the grace of God. I like that Vine doesn't just stop his definition of faith with 'a divine conviction.' He goes on to add that this conviction produces 'a full acknowledgement of God's revelation or truth.'

Read James 2:19. What does James say about the difference between faith and belief?

2) A personal surrender

How would you define surrender?

Surrender is a word that we don't really use much in 21st century America. Our individualistic, I-want-it-my-way society has warped the idea of surrender. Fortunately, we have the most perfect example of surrender to look to: Jesus Christ to the Father.

Read Matthew 26:36-46.

From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus *surrendered* to the will of the Father. In the days and hours leading up to the garden of Gethsemane, even Jesus struggled to surrender to the will of the Father. He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will," and then, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42; NIV). But surrender He did.

Jesus surrendered to the will of the Father by saying, “Not my will but Yours be done.” He surrendered His whole life, His entire ministry to the Father. He surrendered control of His situation to the Father, knowing that His plan was greater. He surrendered to the cross. Surrendering to Christ means laying your life down at His feet and saying, “Not my will but Yours be done.” It means giving Him your hopes and dreams and expectations and allowing Him to work through you, knowing that He works for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). It means falling at the foot of the cross, acknowledging that He bore the punishment that you rightly deserved. Surrender means giving up control, letting God take the wheel.

Faith, while it involves belief, also requires surrender. But it involves one very important other thing: action.

3) Conduct inspired by surrender

James chapter 2 says, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? [...] As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:14,26; NIV) James makes a very important point here: we cannot simply *say* we believe in Christ. We cannot just recite the Nicene Creed and sing the songs in church on Sunday. We can’t just go through the motions and not actually make a change. Our actions and our conduct should be irreparably tied to our faith – the belief *and* the surrender. That should evoke a change in our actions, our attitudes, and our hearts.

What good is our faith if we do not live it out? What good is our belief if it does not inform our decisions, actions and words?

Our faith is only complete if we believe, surrender, and act in a manner worthy of the calling we have received (Ephesians 4:1). Our faith will withstand the hurricanes because we are rooted in Christ. And Hebrews 11 shows us the examples of those who have come before, who were commended for their faith.

Introducing The Faithful

Hebrews chapter 11 has often been called ‘The Hall of Faith.’ It is a list of people and their faithfulness, an example for us to follow. The Hall of Faith reminds me is that faith is not simply

believing. Each person that is mentioned in this chapter is commended for their faith that accompanies an action.

Read James 2:14-26. Interestingly, James mentions two people that we will study in Hebrews 11. Who does he mention and what were they commended for?

The Hall of Faith reminds me that these people weren't perfect. They all had their flaws, but God still worked in them and through them to complete His purpose and bring about His plan. And it gives me hope that He will do the same through me, and through you.

So here's the question that I want you to think about right now, and that we'll revisit at the end of our study: *If someone were to write a Hebrews 11 about your church or family, what would it say about you?*

I've learned over the years that life is a lot like that mile I swam back in college. There are times when I want to give up, when I want to throw in the towel. I'm sure that it's the same for you. Sometimes the waves of life crash over you, taking your breath away for a moment. Life can knock you down further than you thought possible, and it can change in an instant. Thankfully, in the midst of life, our faith is in the One who is above all. We believe. But we don't just believe. We have a firm conviction. We surrender to the One who is above all. He calls us to a way of life. I'm looking forward to looking at the heroes in the Hall of Faith with you, so that we can learn how to run the race set before us.

¹ W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary.