

Flannel Graph, Ropes, & 2 a.m. Friends (Don't Let Go of the Rope)

Introduction

Good morning. Please open your Bibles to [Hebrews 11](#). My name is Jim Fleming. I've been a member here at Stuart Heights for almost 15 years and I teach a Sunday school class at the Hixson Campus. The staff asked me last week to speak to you this morning. I am very excited, grateful, and honored to speak to you this morning.

[Hebrews 11](#) is known as the 'Hall of Faith' because it celebrates so many famous Bible characters. Let's start in [verse 1](#). **1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.**

3 By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible. [And then starting in verse 4, we see the list of Bible celebrities.]

4 By faith Abel . . . 5 By faith Enoch . . . 7 By faith Noah . . . 8 By faith Abraham . . . 11 By faith Sarah . . . 17 By faith Abraham . . . 20 By faith Isaac . . . 21 By faith Jacob . . . 22 By faith Joseph . . . 23 By faith Moses . . . 24 By faith Moses . . . 31 By faith the harlot Rahab . . .

32 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David [this list of people is so famous that King David is an 'also'] **and Samuel and the prophets: 33 who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. 35 Women received their dead raised to life again.** [This is an amazing list and includes incredible stories! And then everything shifts in the middle of [verse 35](#). That period changes everything.]

Others [circle that word] **were tortured** [that doesn't sound incredible], **not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. 36 Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two** [that doesn't sound incredible], **were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.**

Here's my question for us: **What were the names of the others?** We don't know because the Bible doesn't tell us. [03:00](#)

Hebrews 11 has two types of faithful people:

- God gave faithful **heroes**. These are Bible characters at flannel graph status—you remember flannel graph, right? Bible heroes and celebrities get flannel graph. The larger than life icons. Let's look at some great moments in flannel graph history (wait for Jim to say 'next' for each flannel graph slide). However, in the second half of **verse 35** we move beyond the flannel graph. There's no flannel graph images for **verses 36-38**. But there's another category.
- God gave faithful **others**. Their lives are reminders that life isn't always clean and neat—we have a real enemy who is fighting for keeps. There are stories with tragic earthly endings. There are stories we struggle to understand and stories of men and women behind the scenes. The majority of people in the Bible are others supporting heroes.

Which category do we fall in to? Heroes or others?

We are the **others**. I find I relate to the others far more than to the heroes. I came to the conclusion many years ago I would never be famous. When I die, CNN will most likely not report on it. I will be an other. There is no Jim Fleming flannel graph. I'm OK with that. Because the Bible isn't about us. It's not about the others. And it's not about the heroes. So . . .

Who is the Bible about? 06:00

The Bible is about someone better. **Let's watch a video (True and Better) that was inspired by Tim Keller.** The Bible is about **Jesus**. Everything in the Bible points to Jesus. The heroes and the others point to Jesus. Marriage is about Jesus (that's why we don't change it). 11:00

The others are fascinating. Without them, many stories in the Bible would be radically different. This morning, I want to share one of their stories—a story we can relate to. Please turn in your Bibles to **Acts 9**. Let's look at a small group of others. I want us to remember the Bible isn't about them—or us—it's about Jesus. We will come back to that.

Read & Explain (What does it mean?): Acts 9:23-25 (Author = Luke)

Here is a quick summary of **Acts 9:1-22**:

- Saul (who will later be renamed to Paul) is converted on the Damascus Road (**Acts 9:1-9**)—this is a man who is famous for his participation in genocide (that's what we would call a government system systematically killing people for their religious beliefs today)
- Ananias befriends Saul and introduces him to other believers (**Acts 9:10-19**)
- Saul preaches (**Acts 9:20-22**)

Most commentators think there is a three-year gap between **Acts 9:22** and **Acts 9:23** where Saul went to Arabia (see **Galatians 1:17-18**). **David Guzik: Luke skips the three years (perhaps) because he is writing a history of the church, not a history of Paul.** Saul has most likely been a believer for just a few years by the time **Acts 9:23-25** happen. 14:00

23 Now after many [sufficient] **days were past, the Jews** [at that time, enemies of Christianity] **plotted** [counseled together, deliberated] **to kill him** [Saul—because Saul was preaching Jesus and was no longer hunting Christians and this made the Jews mad]. **24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they** [the Jews] **watched** [to stand beside and watch carefully] **the gates** [of Damascus—the city Saul was in] **day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples** [here are the others] **took him** [Saul] **by night and let him down** [send/let down from a higher place to a lower place by slackening or loosening something (pro tip: this was a rope they were using)] **through the wall in a large basket.** [In the parallel passage in [2 Corinthians 11:32-33](#) we learn that they actually let him down through a window in the wall]

A quick word about Biblical architecture: Houses were built on the outsides of the walls (or in the walls themselves if it was a casemate wall—parallel walls with a space between). This provided a way to get out of a city without going through the gate, but it was dangerous.

Lowering Saul down was ingenious, but it wasn't original. It happened in [Joshua 2:15](#) (to the two spies Joshua sent to spy out Jericho) and in [1 Samuel 19:11-12](#) (to David who was spared by his wife Michal). So, these others probably knew their Bibles well enough and recalled those stories.

Sneaking out the back door might not seem like the spiritual thing to do, but it's exactly what Jesus told His disciples to do in [Matthew 10:23a](#): **When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. Barnes: Christianity requires us to sacrifice our lives only when we cannot avoid it without denying the Savior.** Sometimes it is OK to run away. And sometimes, someone many need help doing so.

Let's picture the scene: Saul is trapped in a city and needs to get out. He's at the house of a believer. This house exists in the space between two rock walls. He's literally between a rock and a hard place. Somebody gets a bright idea and remembers the story of the spies at Jericho or the story of David escaping. They decide to put Saul in a basket, tie a rope around it, and lower him through a window and down the wall. This is a great idea, right? [18:00](#)

Let me illustrate how completely crazy this idea was—this idea of lowering Saul down in a basket through a window outside of a wall. **Guys—let's do it.** Jim walks up the stairs and gets in the basket. Someone stops us. **Why?** It's CRAZY. We would never put someone in a basket at night and lower them down a wall with armed guards looking for us. This is crazy.

I've put some questions on the screen that I think might have been at play at this time.

Questions

What do you think was going through Saul's mind? When they came up with this plan? When he got in the basket? When they closed the lid? When they were lowering him down to the ground? What do you think was going through the minds of the guys holding the rope? While they were lowering it down? When it got to the bottom and Saul crawled out and ran away? Would they ever see him again? Would they ever hear how things turned out? [21:00](#)

What was going through Saul's mind? "Don't let go of the rope! Hold on with everything you've got! Hold on! Don't let go of the rope!" (That's a lot of exclamation points, but this was an emotional situation)

I want to focus on the rope holders this morning. Because somebody had to have a hold of that rope. In fact, it was a group of somebodies. We don't even know their names. This would have been a heart-pounding escape with a garrison looking for them. I don't know the last time you picked up a grown man, but they're heavy. These others loved Saul enough to hold the rope.

22:00

Performing this successfully (which they did) took a few things from the others:

1. **Choice**: They chose to risk their lives. They chose to meet in the middle of the night. They chose to love. I asked Mr. Charles Alexander one time what the most powerful thing in the world was and he said it was choice. They made a choice to hold that rope.
2. **Courage**: They risked their lives for Saul's sake. If they were caught, they would have been executed with Saul. They were putting their lives on the line for this new believer. Saul wasn't the Christian legend of the New Testament Christian yet—he doesn't become *Paul* for four more chapters. They had **1 John 3:16** love: **By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.**
3. **Strength**: These others were strong. They were not too tired to do the hard work of rope holding. They did not burn themselves out on their own work so they had no strength left to hold Saul's rope. Jesus wants our bodies, not just our souls. Let's be in shape enough to do the work Jesus has called us to do. I'm not saying we have to be ready to run a triathlon, but let's have the strength to serve. But please understand I'm not talking to you if you're going through a period of illness—I had an ear infection this week and it knocked me down for a few days. I was literally unable to serve the way I wanted to serve. But please understand I am talking to you if you're going through a period of laziness. We all have those periods. Let's ask Jesus to strengthen our hands to do the work He has called us to do.
4. **Cooperation**: This happened by night, so they had to have a set time to meet. They had to meet at a specific place. Someone had to get the supplies. Someone had to plan. They all had to coordinate lowering the rope—all of them working together. They brought simple, but effective things: rope, and a basket. Probably things that could be found in one of their houses. Sometimes the simplest things are the best things. I know many times in my life I try to overcomplicate things, but these others kept it simple. In addition, when it was over, they kept their mouths shut. Sometimes we need cooperation in communication as well.

26:00

Application (What is the point/ big deal? Why should I hold a rope?)

1. I don't know who is in my **basket**. I can't see the future. In **Acts 9**, the man in the basket was just a murderer named Saul. You might have a Saul in your basket. Don't let go of the rope.
2. I might be the **only** one holding someone's rope. If you are the only one holding on, and you let go, it makes it harder on everyone because letting go of the rope makes a mess. When someone is at the end of her rope, we better be at the other end holding on to her.
3. Someone is holding **my** rope. I want us to think about everyone in our lives holding our ropes. For most of us, it began on this earth with our parents. Perhaps a sibling or other family members. Maybe it was a schoolteacher. Perhaps someone in our church. It might have been a classmate or best friend. Maybe it's our spouse. For some of us, it might even be your children or grandchildren. Some ropes we are called to hold our entire lives. And some are just for a season.

Jim's rope holders:

- My wife. She holds my rope by loving me every day. She is kind and supportive. I love you.
- My 2 a.m. friends. I brought some of them with me today. Justin, Albert, Stephen, Sean. These are folks I can call for help at 2 a.m. and do you know what they will do? They will answer the phone—and I will learn everything I need to know about them when they do. They hold my rope by sharpening me with their words and with their works.
- My prayer warriors. My mom—today makes the 14,288th day she's prayed for me—and Darla Skinner are faithful to pray for me. They hold my rope by praying for me every day.

Does anyone think I'm leaving someOne off of this list that should be there?

- Jesus. Jesus holds my rope by never letting go—because there will come a day when my wife, my 2 a.m. friends, my mom, and even Darla will let go of their ropes—either intentionally or unintentionally—but Jesus will never let go of the believer's rope. His promise to never leave us or forsake us is grand and glorious, but know it is only for His children. If you are without Jesus, you are on your own and I invite you to fix that.

Whose rope can I hold?

- The unbeliever's rope. Don't give up on that co-worker, family member, or friend that hasn't accepted Jesus. Keep holding on and praying for his salvation. Don't let go of the rope.
- The believer's rope. Support the members of Jesus' church. Don't let go of the rope.
- Your spouse's rope. This is a hard one as some of you have had spouses that dropped your rope and when the basket hit the ground, it was a mess. I'm sorry for that. But if you're married today, hold your spouse's rope. Don't let go of the rope.
- Your kid's rope. Parents—our children are under attack from an enemy that's described as a lion who is looking for someone to devour. Don't let go of the rope. **30:00**

Personalization (What do I do with that? Now what?)

1. Hold my **brother's** rope. Rope holding is a great way to love people. I love faithful hands. Faithful hands that loved those on the other end. Faithful hands that were at risk of being caught themselves. Faithful hands that often go unnamed. Faithful hands that are not consumed with being famous. Faithful hands that stayed true to the task until the job was done. We didn't read Saul broke any bones because they dropped him, did we?

I love faithful hands. Faithful hands that prepare for those that come. Faithful hands that serve those that arrive. Faithful hands that clean up when all are gone. Faithful hands that hold the ropes so men and women can serve Jesus in the roles to which they have been called. We've all heard behind every good man is a good woman. Let me change that just a bit: Behind every faithful man and every faithful woman are others holding ropes. Faithful at holding the rope of prayer. Faithful at holding the rope of time with Jesus. Faithful at holding the rope of giving. Faithful at holding the rope of community. Faithful at holding the rope of love to a lost and dying world. Don't let go of the rope.

However, rope holding is not without pain. Rope holding causes blisters. Rope holding causes cramped hands. Rope holding rarely is noticed and vastly underappreciated. Rope holding is not glamorous, for the faint of heart, or the quick way to the top. But rope holding is critical. Everything Jesus calls us to do is important—no matter how big or small we think the rope is. Don't let go of the rope.

2. Hold my **sister's** rope. Rope holding is worth it because of the people in the basket. **Who has Jesus put in our baskets? Who do we need to hold the ropes for?** Everybody needs help. I know many of us have held each other's ropes. Many of us work tirelessly to make Stuart Heights the place Jesus wants it to be. Some of you get here early to set up and to welcome people as they come in. Thank you. Some of you come up after services and ask what you can do to help. Thank you. Keep holding those ropes. Don't let go. Keep holding those ropes. Don't let go of the rope. Be an encourager. Be a helper. Don't let go of the rope. It's not about holding the pastor's rope for fame or glory. Hold the rope for Jesus. Don't let go of the rope because Jesus loves those in the basket. Keep holding on. We will get tired and our hands will hurt, but we are all here today because we have been in the basket. We have experienced someone holding our rope. Don't let go of the rope. Don't let go of the rope. Somebody loved us enough to not let go of our rope. Don't let go of the rope.
3. Be held by **Jesus**. This is not a 'work hard and Jesus will love you' message—but I do believe in a works salvation. Jesus worked for it and I enjoy it. The truth is that I can't hold my own rope. It's not possible. He is the only one that will be eternally faithful. He is the only one that will be eternally true. Trust Him to hold your rope. Jesus can do it—He is the true and better rope holder and He wants to do it.

Helps: BibleGateway.com, StudyLight.org, BLB.org **35:00**

Invitation

Pray with me. Father, thank you for your big, beautiful plan of redemption. Thank you for sending Jesus to hold our ropes. Thank you for the protection of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for being a faithful God. Many of us have come this morning wanting to hear from you—and I ask during this time of invitation that you would speak to our hearts. Convict us where we have been ungrateful to you for faithful rope holders in our lives. Burden us with a strong desire to faithfully hold our brother's and sister's ropes. And help us to see what a beautiful savior Jesus is for eternal faithfulness in holding our ropes.

With heads bowed and eyes closed, this is an opportunity for anyone that would like to learn how to be a child of God—how to be part of the family of others and rope holders that I've talked about this morning—part of the family that God holds. This is also a time for anyone that would like to come and join with this local congregation to be a member here at Stuart Heights. Perhaps you've been wanting to be baptized and take your first step of obedience in Jesus as one of His children. Whatever it is, you are welcome here and you have friends here at the altar to help.

Perhaps you would like to come forward this morning and thank God for a rope holder in your life. Perhaps you would like to come forward this morning and pray for God to strengthen your hands so you can be the rope holder He would have you to be. Perhaps you just want to sit where you are and praise God for faithfully holding the rope of your life. Just be obedient.

With no one looking around, I'll ask our praise team to sing. [37:00](#)

Hand off

Chattanooga 8:45: Ethan Anderson

Hixson 10:00: David Ivarson

Chattanooga 11:00: Craig Miller or Roger Haston