

## **A Study of the Book of Hebrews**

### ***Jesus is Better***

#### **Sermon # 21**

#### **“Faith is the Victory”**

#### **Hebrews 11:32-40**

We live in a society where winning is everything. Everything in our society is success oriented. Even the church has acquired the success syndrome. Over the last two decades in our country we have grown accustomed to hearing the concept that “true faith” is always evidenced by tangible success. Proponents of what has come to be known as the “health and wealth gospel” have built Television empires that sell their ideas, that unless you are healthy and wealthy you not living up to your potential. Anything less than tangible success that leads to your comfort and prosperity in life is shamed as being a defective faith. So any failures, illnesses or tragedies are ruled to be outside of the will of God and beneath the dignity of the Christian. *Is that what the Bible really teaching about faith?*

No, in fact to believe this “false gospel” about faith is to ignore the principal that there is a difference between spiritual success and material success. There is a difference between being deemed a success by the world and deemed a success by God.

Last time in (11:23-29) we looked at “*Moses: A Man of Faith*” and noted how this man considered by the Jews to be the greatest of the Old Testament characters lived by faith. Today the author of Hebrews gives his summary to his great “Heroes of the Faith Hall of Fame,” he gives two great principles about faith. This passage is

extremely important for blowing the fog of confusion away from what faith is and what kind of life faith guarantees. Today we will see the two-fold nature of faith, first we see the exciting victories of faith and secondly we see the enduring virtue of faith.

First, The Exciting Victories of the Faith 11:32-35a

In verse thirty-two it is as if the writer realizes that time constraints will not allow him to continue a detailed account of the heroic exploits of faith. He says, "*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 and Samuel and the prophets:*" He has now confined himself to six additional figures whose lives span from the time of the Judges through the Monarchy and ends with the inclusion of "the prophets." These men who are mentioned are intended to be suggestive of a host of men and women who had lived for God in a hostile world.

Gideon the first listed is a powerful example of faith, in that he and three hundred select men routed the Midianite army with torches and empty jugs (Judges 7:7-25).

Barak, when the judges ruled Israel, was a military leader who along with Deborah, led Israel to defeat Siscera and the Canaanites (Judges 4:8-10).

Samson, is usually remember for his great strength not his faith, yet in spite of his weaknesses, he was a great champion of Israel during period of the Philistine oppression (Judges 13:1- 16:31).

Jephthah, (Jud 11:1-12:7) often remember for his foolish vow, placed his faith in God and relied on his power to overcome the Ammonities.

David, a man who could and did make tragic mistakes, was first and foremost a man of faith. David is called "a man after God's own heart" because of his faith and his desire to do the will of God.

Leon Morris points out that each of the men cited here had defects in their faith. "*Gideon was slow to take up arms; Barak hesitated and went forward only when Deborah encouraged him; Samson was enticed by Delilah; and Jephthah made a foolish vow and stubbornly kept it.*" Although their faith was less than perfect it did not keep them from being used by God!

Then the writer names Samuel who was first of the prophets and the last of the judges. He started as a young boy and continued always through his life serving God.

The last to be named in this list are "*The prophets,*" who remain unnamed except for Samuel, all served God cheerfully, courage-ously and confidently accepted God commands and faced whatever opposition came along.

In verse thirty-three he details some of what they had been able to do through faith, "*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.*"

The accomplishments sound like the stuff of childhood fantasies – slaying dragons, vanquishing evil, beating the odds, rescuing the damsel in distress, laughing in the face of death, escaping just in nick of time and making it all look incredibly easy.

First, we see the rather broad over-view of the results of these believers faith; they saw political victory in that they "*through faith subdued kingdoms,*" they achieved moral success in government as they "*worked righteousness*" (some translations have this as "administered justice), and they achieved spiritual reward in that they "*obtained promises,*" that is that they received words of promise from God.

But secondly, these believers also saw various forms of personal deliverance. Those who "*stopped the mouths of lions*" seems to be an obvious reference to Daniel who was thrown to the lions and left over-night but was unscathed, "*because he trusted in his God.*" (Dan 6:23).

It was Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, who, "*quenched the violence of the flames*" when they were thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship false gods (Daniel 3:16-30).

Many of the prophets including Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah, "*escaped the edge of the sword.*"

Stories such as David's defeat of Goliath with a sling and Gideon's victory over the Midianites demonstrated that "*out of weakness were made strong.*"

The Old Testament contains many examples of groups who *"became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."*

But if the faith of God's people could boast of spectacular achievements in the form of military victories, miraculous deliverances and the raising of the dead to life, it was no less inspiring than the willing endurance by others of horrible torture and cruel death.

*Second, The Enduring Virtues of Faith 11:35b-40*

The description of the accomplishments wrought through faith assumes a decidedly different tone beginning with the word *"others"* in the second half of verse thirty-five. It says that, *"Others were tortured, 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, 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."*

The transition that we see here is important, not all men and women of faith experience miraculous deliverances. Some of them were tortured and died. Having true faith in God is no guarantee of comfort and security in this life. God does not always work miracles to deliver his people by faith, sometimes by faith God sustains his people through suffering. Since the Greek word for *"tortured"* literally means *"to beat as a drum"* some commentators believe that this refers to Eleazer who was stretched on a drum and beaten to death.

Others were not only physically tortured but they had to endure the "mocking" of those who hated them.

If verses 33-35a sounded like a dream, then vv. 35b-38 sounds like a nightmare. Many of us can identify more with the last part of the text; we feel that we're living the nightmare rather than the dream. We don't seem to be conquering any kingdoms, rather, evil seems to have its way with us. The lions are devouring us; the fires are consuming us; the swords are cutting us to pieces.

What distinguishes the people in first half from the people in the last half of the text? In some cases nothing. In some cases, the same people are listed in both halves of the text. They saw wonderful victories and at other times they endured seeming defeat. The people in both parts are characterized by faith, for the writer says in verse thirty-nine that "*all these*" had faith. These "*others*" had faith, but God did not see fit to deal with them in the same way he dwelt with those who had experienced victories.

These unknown men and women of faith were not delivered from difficult circumstances, yet God honors their faith. In fact, it takes more faith to endure than it does to accept escape. These believers are like the three Hebrew young men of Daniel 3 who when threatened with death by fire exclaimed in verses 16-18, "*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.'*" (the KJV translates this phrase "we are not careful to answer) (17) *If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king.*

*(18) But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."*

One cannot help but think of the contrast these verses draw with the health and wealth philosophy taught by some today. This philosophy says that God wants all of us to be healthy and wealthy. According to this view the only reason for you not experiencing it, is because we do not claim it in faith. While in the portion of the chapter emphasizing the exciting victories of faith, it was mentioned that some "*escaped the edge of the sword*" (v.34), yet in verse thirty-seven it states that one of the hardships of faith was that some "*were slain with the sword.*" Although Elijah escaped the vengeance of Jezebel, other prophets of the same period were slain (1 Kings 19:10). Jeremiah's life was delivered from Jehoiachim the king, but his fellow prophet Uriah was slain by the sword and his body cast into a common grave (Jeremiah 26:33). By faith one lived and by faith another died. Faith did not always deliver believers out of suffering sometimes it delivered them through suffering. In the time of the Apostles Herod Agrippa killed James with the sword but Peter escaped (Acts 12:1-11). In spite of the fact that the world held these men and women of faith in low esteem that this is not the estimation of God. God said of them that "*of whom the world was not worthy*" (v.38).

It is said that they did not accept deliverance that "*they might obtain a better resurrection*" (v.35). How can the death of a martyr be a "*better resurrection?*" Better than what? The answer is in remembering the previous context of the first part of verse 35. The

"women received their dead raised to life again," the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24) and the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8-37), both saw their sons who were restored to life by Elijah and Elisha, in due course died again. The resurrection that martyrs aspired to was a resurrection to eternal life. This "*better resurrection*" is the hope of all who die in Christ (1 Thess. 4:16).

Verse thirty-nine reminds the reader, "*And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise.*" The verse begins with "*All these,*" that is the whole succession of men and women of faith, both named and unnamed, provided a good testimony. A testimony that their faith rather than being extinguished by severe testing and oppression, prevailed and thus proved the genuineness of their faith. These believers died without having possessed the promise. In spite of their empty-handedness, they persevered in faith, knowing that faith's reward is not always given now. The final outcome on earth is not the measure of victory in the race.

John Piper says, "*The common feature of the faith that escapes suffering and the faith that endures suffering is this, Both of them involve believing that God himself is better than what life can give you now, and is better than what death can take from you later. When you have it all, faith says that God is better, and when you lose it all, faith says that God is better... What does faith believe in the moment of torture? That if God loved me, he would get out this? No. Faith believes that there is a kind of resurrection for believer's which is better than the miracle of escape. It's better than the kind of*

*resurrection experienced by the widow's son, who returned to life to die again later."* [John Piper. "Faith to Be Strong and Faith to be Weak."

[www.desiringgod.org/library/97/081097.html](http://www.desiringgod.org/library/97/081097.html)]

A modern example of one who had this kind of faith was a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who left his prestigious position as a professor at the University of Berlin to join the ranks of those who stood against Hitler and the Nazi within the German church. The professor of systematic theology said that Bonhoeffer was foolish saying, *"It is a great pity that our best hope in the faculty is being wasted on the church struggle."* God choose for Bonhoeffer's route to that of the saints in second half of Hebrews 11. He was arrested and imprisoned. He was eventually hung in the Flossenbug Concentration Camp. His body was tossed aside into a pile of corpses and burned. His death came only two days before the Americans liberated the Flossenbug Camp. As he faced the fury of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer said, *"The ultimate responsible question is not how can I heroically make the best of a bad situation but rather how the coming generation can be enabled to live."* [Scott Grant. "The story of Faith."

[www.pbc.org./dp/grant/hebrews/heb21.html](http://www.pbc.org./dp/grant/hebrews/heb21.html) p. 5]

In verse forty as the author brings to a conclusion his list of the heroes of the faith, he says, *"God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us."* He said, *"that they should not be made perfect apart from us."* Do you see what he is saying? When he uses the word "perfect" it means complete. He is saying that this story – God's great story of faith is not complete without you. We are a part of God's story of faith. God

looking down through the ages foresaw that lives would be a part of this great story of faith. What a privilege!

The testimony of these witnesses is that all believer's can finish the race, all believer's can live by faith and that through faith all believers can accomplish great things for God.

Conclusion

A life of Faith is not something reserved for a few "elite saints."

A life of Faith is possible to all kinds of believers in all kinds of situations.

A life of Faith is possible to all God's children.