

THE STUDY OF HEBREWS—YEAR 2

LESSON 17—NOTES

HEBREWS 11:32-40

FAITH TRUSTS GOD IN SPITE OF RESULTS

INTRODUCTION

Hebrews chapter 11, appears in the middle of a section of exhortation (10:19—12:29) where the author encourages his readers to continue believing until the end and not fall away. The Old Testament saints of faith are introduced in chapter 11 so that the readers will be encouraged by them, imitate them and continue believing in Jesus Christ until the end. Since the believers in Hebrews were under persecution, today's verses must have been very appropriate and applicable to their current struggle.

The author finishes chapter 11 with the call to courageous faith—courage in struggles, courage in suffering and courage in waiting. For, faith is certain that God's promises will be realized even if they are not visible to the human eye and even if death occurs before the promises are fulfilled. Faith trusts God for the future. Faith stands the test of life and death situations. It trusts God in the highs and lows of life. Faith gives itself entirely to God and trusts him in triumphs and tragedies and in spite of results.

HEBREWS 11:32-35a

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed *acts of righteousness*, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received *back* their dead by resurrection.

The author now, has taken us all the way through to the entry of the of the Israelites into the

promised land. He stops sharing specific names and occasions of faithfulness and begins instead to list judges, prophets and a king, in random order (not in order of historical or biblical appearance). It's not that these men and women were not important; but is instead just as the author noted, "**For time will fail me if I tell of ...**" (11:32). The author does not have the space to list all of the faithful saints, it could stretch on for centuries.

John Owens writes that the author,

"Changes the method he has used up to now. No longer does he single out his witnesses and show how each one is an example of faith. Now he proposes two things to confirm in general: first, faith effects all kinds of things when we are called to them; second, faith can enable us to suffer the most terrible things that we can be exposed to."

In verses 32 to 35a the author gives examples of faith conquering in success, over obstacles.

The six men the author names in verse 32, were all rulers of one kind or another. **Gideon** gave Israel victory over the Midianites with his force of just three hundred men, when he obeyed God's command to arm his men with torches and earthen jars. When the trumpets were blown, they smashed the jars and God threw the enemy into a panic. **Barak**, helped by the prophetess Deborah, led the united tribes in their victory against Sisera and the mighty Canaanite chariot army. **Samson**, known for his weakness for foreign women, nonetheless shows his faith because of his one-man war against the Philistines. **Jephthah's** foolish vow cost his daughter's life, but he too was a man of faith, leading the tribes in battle against the Ammonites. **David**, Israel's greatest king, the man after God's own heart, slew the giant Goliath by faith. **Samuel's** career as judge and prophet was a crucial one, bridging the years of turmoil under the judges to the early monarchy. Without Samuel's faithful ministry, Israel would surely have fallen into total disarray.

The prophets (v.32) are unnamed except for Samuel. These prophets, just as Gideon, Barak, and the others, risked everything for the Lord. They accepted God's commands and faced

whatever opposition came along. They did not fight on battlefields, but they had many victories in the Lord because of faith.

The descriptions in verses 33-34 are general and refer to the faithful ones mentioned in verse 32. The ***mouths of lions*** most likely refers to Daniel, and ***quenched the power of fire*** to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. ***From weakness were made strong***, may refer to Samson who forfeited his strength through folly but regained it at the end through faith, or Jehoshaphat who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

John MacArthur writes,

“The point of mentioning these works is to show that, whether the need was for political victory, helping those in need, receiving promises, overcoming natural enemies, protection from war or weakness, or winning in war—the power to accomplish these things was from God and the power was received by faith in Him.”

In verse 35 the author completes his list with ***women received back their dead by resurrection***. Elijah brought back to life the child of the widow of Zarephath, and his successor, Elisha, did the same for a Shunammite woman’s son. These mothers and these prophets believed God for resurrection, and He performed it.

One of the interesting features of the faithful saints in this list, is their weakness and sins. ***Barak*** wasn’t courageous enough to do battle without Deborah. ***Gideon***, asking for signs demonstrated his lack of faith, as well as making an ephod and catapulting Israel to sin. ***Samson’s*** sexual infidelities and impulsive acts were infamous. ***Jephthah*** foolishly vowed to sacrifice his own daughter. ***Samuel’s*** sons didn’t turn out well but he appointed them as judges anyway. ***David*** committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. Isn’t it compelling that the author of Hebrews does not mention these weaknesses?

Commenting on this, Thomas Schreiner states;

“It is not the sins and faults of these men that are remembered (he doesn’t mention the faults of any of them!) but their faith and trust in God, showing that perseverance in faith for the author is not the same thing as perfection. Indeed one may sin dramatically and still persevere in faith.”

Trillia Newell writes,

“The Hall of Faith is meant to give us examples of the enduring faith of believers through their failures and through their trials, and it is meant to point us to the faithfulness of God. Aren’t we glad this isn’t an exhaustive list? Aren’t we happy that God provided His perfect Son for imperfect faithfulness? And aren’t we glad that it is not our good works that allow us to be in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Rev. 20:15)? You will be called faithful because our God is faithful.”

If the author of Hebrews account of faith was to stop at this point (v.32-35a), where we see the many accomplishments of the faithful Old Testament saints, it might leave us with the dangerously false impression that faith keeps us from suffering in this world. Many times we have heard this teaching, that if you have enough faith, you need never be sick, or poor, or troubled in any way. However, our next set of verses say...

HEBREWS 11:35b-38

...and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mocking and flogging, and further, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented (*people of whom the world was not worthy*), wandering in deserts, on mountains, and *sheltering in caves and holes in the ground.*

These verses refute the thinking that if you have enough faith you will not be troubled in any way, but instead tell us about **others**, that is, people who trusted God and yet were subjected to the greatest of trials. In some of life’s situations it is impossible to conquer, escape, become mighty or victorious. The powers are too great, the circumstances beyond our control. In these

cases faith is a life-accepting quality, enabling a man or woman to face suffering and adversity with serenity, endurance and trust. This, however, was no less a conquering faith, for it enabled them to honor God by faithfully enduring to the end, which possibly may require an even greater faith.

In verses 35b to 38 faith is shown conquering through perseverance in great suffering. The many kinds of suffering mentioned in these verses, (just as the conquests mentioned in the preceding verses) apply generally to the faithful saints. They are a summary of the numerous and varied kinds of affliction God's people face and are often called to endure for Him. Many of the afflictions mentioned in these verses were long-term and might last a lifetime. Whether they were killed or made outcasts, the fact is the same—they courageously, valiantly and uncompromisingly suffered for the Lord because of their faith.

Raymond Brown concludes,

*“In time of fierce hostility and cruel persecution, many were given the faith to cope heroically with torture (in 11:35b the word used explicitly refers to the rack), mockery and other sufferings. In their moments of crisis, faith was imparted to them, by which they could evaluate the present and anticipate the future. Presented with an **opportunity for release**, they realized that present liberty is of passing worth. They looked forward to **a better resurrection**, knowing that the joys of that better country had already been prepared by a God who is always faithful (11:16). These valiant men and women were given the strength to suffer rather than to conquer. They turned agonizing distress into triumphant achievement.”*

Through faith God gave the power to His people, to see them through these problems, not to escape them. Just as it is sometimes God's will for His people to conquer and triumph in a struggle, it is also sometimes His will for His people to continue and persevere in their suffering. God will give them victory, but it may only be spiritual victory (the only kind of victory He guarantees). It often takes more courage to hold on than to fight on, and where there is need for more courage there is need for more faith.

John MacArthur writes,

“Sometimes affliction is inescapable; sometimes it is not. To the person of faith, no affliction is escapable that requires denial or compromise of God’s Word. What is easily escaped for the worldly person is not for the faithful. When it is suffered because of God’s Word and standing for Him, God’s people will take torture, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection. Here is the pinnacle of faith, willingness to accept the worst the world has to offer—death...because of trust in the best God has to offer—resurrection.”

In verse 38 we have a wonderful understatement that says so much: ***The world was not worthy of them.*** The terrible suffering that came to the people of God was met with faith and courage... and the world wasn’t worthy to have them around. The world thought these men and women were unworthy to live in the world, when in reality because of its unbelief this world was not a fit place for the believers. *“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”* (1 John 2:17).

Thomas Schreiner adds,

“The righteous, the readers are reminded, are often despised by the world, and ‘the world was not worthy’ of such people, showing their unworthiness by their mistreatment and rejection of those who put their trust in the Lord...If the readers expect to be accepted and praised, they need to rethink matters in light of the Old Testament. The people of God have always been a minority people, a pilgrim people, and often despised and forsaken”.

HEBREWS 11:39-40

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

The author returns to the theme of 11:2. God ***approved*** these Old Testament saints on

account of their faith. Their faith sustained them in good times and bad, in prosperity and suffering. These saints put their faith in **what was promised** and yet they did not receive what was promised. Their faith was confined to the limits of the old covenant. It strained forward to **something better**.

Schreiner comments;

“They recognized that they must wait for the fullness of the promise, that the promise would be realized eschatologically. The promise here is another way of speaking of the final inheritance (inherit the promises and heirs of the promise, 6:12, 17), and in 9:15 it is defined as the eternal inheritance. Similarly the promise is understood as the eschatological rest (4:1), as the realization of final salvation (10:36), and as the coming of the kingdom (12:26,28).”

The author says that **apart from us they would not be made perfect**. His believing readers and himself (and by implication we who live 2000 years later) are part of the completion of this chapter on the “Hall of Faith.” The Old Testament saints could be made perfect only as Christians are today... by Jesus himself and his sacrifice. Perfection or fulfilment would come through a New Covenant, by an eternal legacy, made possible because of a better sacrifice. The “house” of God (3:2,6) consists of the faithful saints in the Old Covenant and the believers in the New Covenant. They and we together now enjoy unrestricted access to God through Christ, as fellow citizens of the heavenly home. All of us are redeemed by Christ, the only perfecter of everyone’s faith (12:2).

Schreiner again continues;

*“God ordained that Old Testament believers would not be perfected apart from New Testament believers. Despite the remarkable faith of the Old Testament saints, something **better** would only come with the New Covenant. The something **better** arrived with Jesus’ death and resurrection, with the final cleansing of sins through him. Hence, now that Christ has come, those who trust in Jesus have experienced something better even now.”*

The author has again focused on the word **better**. It is a key to the book of Hebrews, which speaks of better things in Christ—a better plan, a better priest, a better covenant, a better sacrifice, better blood, a better country forever. These faithful saints were waiting to see these better things, and what they hoped to see, we have been given the grace to see through faith in Jesus Christ. The question we need to ask ourselves is—if they could believe not seeing Christ, knowing only shadows and not the reality, not seeing, with anything like the clarity we have been given by the purchase price of our redemption by the cross, how much more faith should we have than they, we who are called by his name? John Calvin writes *“A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?”*

*The following excerpt written by Richard Phillips is so beautifully written I had to include it. 😊

A PANORAMA OF FAITH

If you go to the visitors center at the Gettysburg battlefield, you will find a panorama depicting what took place there, a circular portrait within which you may stand to view the drama as if you were there. That is what our writer has done for us in these verses. Here, we stand amid biblical history, among these heroes of faith, and we see what faith brings and what faith can do. What John said at the end of his first epistle would be a more than fitting inscription: “This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

We can observe four facets of faith from this panorama. The first is that what matters is not the circumstances in which find ourselves but our faith in God. It ought to be obvious that Christian faith does not guarantee us comfort in this world. Yes, God delivers some from trouble, but others God delivers in trouble. Faithful Elijah was spared Ahab’s wrath, but numerous other faithful prophets died by his sword (1 Kings 19:10). Jeremiah escaped King Jehoiakim’s hatred, but his fellow prophet Uriah did not escape. If God sent an angel to break Peter’s chains, he also allowed James, another one of Christ’s three closest disciples to die at Herod’s command. Understand, then that God may place you on either of the two sides of this record: on the side of those who conquered in success or that of those who conquered in defeat. What matters is

not the circumstances, neither the blessing in this life nor the trials. What matters is the faith by which we may conquer in all circumstances through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Second, faith suffices while we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. It is true that many blessings come to the Christian in this life, yet the great point of this chapter is the one found in verse 39: "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised." One of the reasons for this is that God's promises are beyond what can be received in this mortal existence. It is not in the flesh but in glory that we will be fit to receive what God has for us. Paul writes, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Thus we are encouraged in our faith, knowing that just ahead lies an eternal weight of glory, beyond the cross there awaits a crown. What do we have while we wait, often in great difficulty? Faith suffices for the man or woman of God, for faith perceives and makes real these things that are yet unseen.

Third—and I think this is the main point the writer of Hebrews had for his original readers—times of trial especially demand faith. We remember that this letter was written to those tempted to fall back because of persecution. Earlier the author reminded them of a time when their heroes suffered some of the things recorded in this passage. Only those who stand firm in faith, even in hardship, are joined to this honor roll of salvation. Indeed, that is what trials do: they test and try our faith, they burn away the dross so that what is left is pure and glorious to God. Jonathan Edwards rightly comments: "The divine excellency of real Christianity is never exhibited with such advantage as when under the greatest trials; then it is that true faith appears much more precious than gold."

In trials, we are encouraged by the knowledge of Christ's suffering for us and of the unbreakable bond created with him through our faith. Thus Paul could write,

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship
Persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:
"For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to
Be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through*

him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35-37)

Fourth, and finally, let us remember that in the end, when all else is gone, what will matter is our faith. It is only through faith that we are saved. Look back over this list of names and those associated with these descriptions, and think of the great variety that exists among them. Some were Jews; others were not. Some were rich, and others were poor. Some were men, some were women; some were loved, some were hated; some were successful, some were not. What, then is it that puts their names on this blessed list of God's beloved? It is only one thing: faith. Realize too, that someday your life will be looked back upon in the same way we now look back on these lives of others. How insignificant will be so much that we think important now—our clothes, our cars, our houses, our reputations. With faith we gain Christ and his cross, the forgiveness of sin and life everlasting; without faith we are left to perish with the useless things of this world.

The twentieth century martyr Jim Elliot was right when he said; "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

That is the note on which our passage concludes: "These were all commended for their faith." Literally it says, "These were attested, they had their names recorded, for their faith." In other words, their names are written here only because of their faith, and the same is true in the Book of Life in heaven, where their names are also found. It is only through faith in Christ that we are saved and thus have our names recorded in the list of the redeemed. In the day of judgment that is all that will matter, and faith then will indeed be more precious than gold.

-Richard D. Phillips

DESCRIPTIONS FROM JOHN MACARTHER COMMENTARY

Gideon, a judge and military leader, had assembled 32,000 men to fight the Midianites and the Amalekites. To keep Israel from thinking the coming victory was by her own power, God cut her

forces down to 10,000 and then to a mere 300. These 300 were separated out solely on the basis of how they drank water from a spring. The enemy, by contrast, were “as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (Judg. 7:12). Yet Gideon’s men were outfitted only with trumpets and with pitchers with torches inside. With even fewer men and less effort than used to defeat Jericho, the entire heathen enemy army was routed (7:16-22). Only a fool would have attempted such a courageous approach to battle apart from God’s direction and power. From the perspective of faith, only a fool would not attempt such a thing when he has God’s direction and power.

Barak is unknown in Scripture outside the brief account in Judges 4-5 and the mention of his name in Hebrews 12:32. We are told nothing of his background or training. Through Deborah, the judge, God promised that Israel would be delivered from Jabin, the Canaanite king, whose great commander, Sisera, had a large, powerful army that boasted 900 iron chariots. According to the Lord’s instruction, Deborah asked Barak to assemble an Israelite force of only 10,000 men, taken from two tribes, Naphtali and Zebulun. The rest of the tribes were not asked to participate, apparently to show Israel, and the Canaanites, that God could be victorious with only a token army from a small part of Israel. Barak assembled his men on Mt. Tabor and charged Sisera as he had been commanded by God. “And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak” (Judg. 4:15). Barak and his men were involved, and probably fought valiantly, but the success of the campaign was the Lord’s. Without His help, Israel would easily have been slaughtered. Barak was told in advance that the glory of victory would not be his. Not only did the Lord fight the battle for His people, but he allowed a woman to kill Sisera, so that Barak would have even less cause for claiming credit for himself (4:9). Barak believed God’s promise of victory and was not the least concerned that a woman would get credit for slaying Sisera. In fact he insisted that Deborah, a woman judge, go to battle with him (v. 8). He wanted her spiritual, not her military, help. She was the Lord’s special representative in those days, and Barak wanted the Lord’s person with him. The fact that he wanted her along was another indication of his trust in the Lord. As God’s prophetess, she was of greater value to him than his 10,000 men. Barak was not concerned

about Sisera's power, because he had God's power. By such courageous faith he conquered kingdoms.

Samson is not most remembered for his faith, but for his physical strength and personal gullibility. In many ways he was immature and self-centered, unable to cope with the miraculous power God had given him. Yet he was a man of faith. He never doubted that God was the source of his power, of which his hair was only a symbol. Samson was a judge of Israel and was given the special task of opposing the Philistines, who then ruled over Israel. Samson's own motives for fighting the Philistines were often mixed, but he knew he was doing the Lord's will in the Lord's power. From his early manhood the Spirit of the Lord had been with him, and we are told specifically that it was the Spirit that strengthened him in his amazing one-man battles (Judg. 13:25; 14:19; 15:14; 16:28). Samson knew that God had called him and that God had empowered him to "begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines," just as He had told Samson's mother before her son was even conceived (13:5). God had promised him power and Samson trusted God for that power. He faced the Philistines not in the courage of physical prowess but in the courage of faith. We are inclined to judge Samson by his weaknesses. But God commends him for his faith.

Jephthah preceded Samson as judge of Israel, and his responsibility was to subdue the Ammonites, one of Israel's many enemies. Despite his foolish vow *to sacrifice whoever would next walk through his door—which would be his own daughter** (Judg. 11:30-31), Jephthah's trust was in the Lord, and his power was from the Lord (vv. 29, 32). Even people of faith make mistakes, and God honored Jephthah for his faith.

*My addition.

David stands out as one of the obviously great men of the Old Testament. His trust in the Lord began when he was a boy, tending sheep, killing lions and bears, and taking on Goliath with a slingshot. David faced Goliath in utter confidence that the Lord would give him power to defeat this giant. While the rest of Israel, including the king and David's own brothers, were cowering in fear, David calmly walked up to Goliath and announced, "This day the LORD will deliver you

up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you” (1 Sam. 17:46). It seems never to have occurred to David not to trust the Lord. Like the other heroes of faith, David was not perfect, but God called him “a man after My heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22). He pleased God because of the courage of his faith to trust Him and do His will.

Samuel is added to this list of warriors, though he was not a warrior. But he fought a battle equal to any that soldiers face. His great foes were idolatry and immorality. He had to stand up in the middle of a polluted society and fearlessly speak God’s truth. His severest opponents frequently were not the against our enemies. Social pressure can be more frightening than military power. This prophet of God, who was also Israel’s last judge, began “ministering before the LORD, as a boy wearing a linen ephod” (1 Sam. 2:18) and continued faithful to God throughout his life. In the courage of faith, he ruled and prophesied.

Tortured is from the Greek *tumpaniz*, from the same root as the English tympani, a kettledrum. The particular torture referred to involved stretching the victim over a large drum-like instrument and beating him with clubs, often until dead. God’s faithful are willing to be beaten to death rather than compromise their faith in Him. They would not sacrifice the future on the altar of the immediate. They preferred being put to death, because by faith they knew that one day they would be resurrected.

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