

So Many Stories . . . So Little Time

Heroes, Part 10

Hebrews 11:32-34a

On November 13, 1982, the world paused and paid tribute to the memory of fallen soldiers and nurses who gave their lives during the Vietnam War. On that day, The Wall, as it's been nicknamed, was dedicated in Washington, D.C.

Made out of black granite, standing 10 feet tall, that wall of granite panels stretches more than 2 football field lengths. Carved by computer into the granite panels are the names of heroes gone by.

Nothing more is said . . . row after row of the names of those who died in the war.ⁱ

When the monument was dedicated, at first – from what I've read – there was an outcry of public disapproval. There should be famous quotes embedded into the monument, pictures or carvings; additional panels bearing the words of speeches and tributes to the dead . . . something more.

But over time, the profound message sunk in . . . anything said would be insufficient . . . 58,272 names silently bear witness to their ultimate sacrifice in life . . . and in death.

What more could be said.

On the same month of month of November, 119 years earlier, the nation grieved the losses from another war – a Civil War.

Out on a field where a recent battle had taken the lives of 51,000 soldiers, Abraham Lincoln stood on a platform and delivered a 2 minute speech. His brevity was shocking.

When he sat down, a member of the Philadelphia Press Corp whispered to him, "Is that all?" He replied, "That is all." The newspapers scoffed at such a failed performance – the Chicago Times said that every American would be ashamed at the president's silly, dishwater diluted words; society at large considered his remarks crude and insufficient – imagine, the speaker that preceded Lincoln had spoken for more than an hour. The majority of newspapers never even put his speech on the front page.ⁱⁱ

His Gettysburg Address *was* brief – but soon everyone discovered its depth of meaning; it's now considered one of the greatest American speeches

ever delivered and it has since become a national treasure.

The truth is you don't need a lot of words to describe truly great events and truly courageous people.

Like the Vietnam Wall, beginning at *verse 32*, the writer of Hebrews 11, simply lists the names of heroes of the faith. Then, in *verses 33 and 34*, he quickly rattles off some of the greatest accomplishments of faith in about 35 words.

You might wonder – is that all? Is that it?

It was – and to these Hebrew Christians in the first century – all the way down to the Christians in the 21st century, it's just enough to provoke our hearts toward courage and hope and love and faith and perseverance.

Now the writer begins *verse 32* by writing – you'll notice – ***What more shall I say?***

You could render it, "What more do I need to say?" In other words, you got the point by now.

Faith is the mighty act of God through the life of someone available.

He then adds the statement in *verse 32* – ***For time will fail me*** . . . in other words, "I don't have enough time to give all the illustrations that I could of the demonstrations of genuine faith."

I just don't have enough time.

It's so encouraging to me to hear another preacher say he's out of time.

He writes in *verse 32*, ***I don't have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel and the prophets.***

Now it's no surprise that he doesn't have enough time. But what is surprising is the list of names he just rattled off.

First of all, he doesn't rattle them off in chronological order – which is wonderful evidence of the inspiration of scripture through the personality of a human author. Someone editing these comments later would have cleaned up the list and put the names in order.

Barak serves before Gideon and Samson comes after Jephthah. The author just rattled them off as soon as they came to his mind.

But the most startling thing about this list isn't the fact that the names are out of order . . . the startling thing about this list is who got on it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Read it again . . . we can understand David and Samuel . . . but Gideon, Barak, Samson?

Why not Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Hanna or Ruth?

I mean, if you're going to rattle off some names, at least pick some that had better resume's.

But that is exactly God's point!

Six Men and Some Prophets

These guys didn't have polished resumes and clean rap sheets.

Now the first thing we need to clear up is a misconception about the role of a judge. You need to understand that they didn't have a courtroom; they didn't wear black robes and they didn't get a pension either.

In fact, these judges were more like Wyatt Earp and Davey Crockett than dignified Supreme Court Justices.

They actually resembled western sheriffs who faced down dangerous enemies, enforcing justice; as well as leading the people into battle.

Their function, according to **Judges 2:16** was the God-given responsibility to deliver the people from the hands of those who plundered them – or raided their land.

For the most part, these were rough and tumble men . . . many of them liked to shoot first and then ask you what your problem was.

And they were far from perfect men . . . and that's part of God's point here in the people He finds available to demonstrate faith in His power.

In fact, one of them wasn't that tough at all; he didn't even want to volunteer.

He's the first guy in the list.

1. Gideon was his name.

Judges 6-8 tells his story.

He was so afraid of following God that after God called him into action, he went and hid out in the barrel where they squeezed grapes out for wine.

He was so certain that God had chosen the wrong guy to be a judge, he told God that he'd put out a fleece of lamb's wool. If in the morning the fleece was wet with dew, and the ground all around was dry, he'd go along.

The next morning Gideon wrung out a bowl full of water from the fleece, and the ground was dry.

He said, Lord that might have been a coincidence; so this time, please make the fleece dry and the ground all wet. That's exactly what happened.

So Gideon pulls together an army of 32,000 men. God said, "Gideon, cut it down to 10,000". So he did.

God came along and said, "Your army is still too big – take them to the river and let them get a drink of water; get rid of all those guys who bend down and drink directly from the river; but keep those soldiers who kneel down, collect the water in their hand raising it to their mouths – in other words, keep only the soldiers that are alert for enemy attack.

Of those 10,000 soldiers, 9,700 of them dropped down on all fours and started drinking directly from the river.

I can see Gideon running up and down the riverbank . . . not that way . . . not that way – use your hands.

300 men were left.

Gideon's probably looking for his fleece.

The enemy army of Midianites was 135,000 soldiers armed to the teeth.

And you would expect Gideon to run away! But this farmer, turned judge didn't – even after God revealed His battle strategy of broken clay pitchers and torches and trumpets.

Here's the lesson . . . **Gideon demonstrated a faith in God's plan that overruled personal fear**

2. Barak is listed next.

Judges chapters 4 and 5 tell the story.

He's called by God to lead the troops into battle against a warlord named Sisera who commanded the chariot army of Canaanites.

Nothing would have thrilled him more. And God promised ahead of time that he'll win. So, his past will be exonerated – some believe he was hiding out in a city of refuge when God called him to become a judge – one thing's for sure; his fame as a victorious judge and general will sweep through the nation.

But then God adds – "Listen, Barak, because of the wickedness of this warlord, I'm going to turn his name into an embarrassment for every enemy nation out there, because I'm not going to allow you to kill him, I'm going to have a woman take his life.

And Barak swallowed his pride and agreed to allow God to receive all the glory and a woman to be heralded as the victor over Sisera instead of himself.

And that's exactly what happened.

D. L. Moody once said, "It's wonderful what God will do with someone who refuses to keep the credit."

Here's the point. Barak demonstrated a faith that overpowered his personal pride.

3. Next in line is Samson.

Judges chapters 13-16 tell the full story of this man who really should have learned that little children's chorus, "O be careful little eyes what you see."

It would have saved him from trouble. And it would have kept him from that fatal haircut, right?

His eyes fell on Delilah and she coaxed out of him his secret – his hair didn't give him power – his hair represented his commitment to his Nazirite vow.

He hair didn't give him power . . . some of us are counting on that!

With his head in Delilah's lap, sound asleep, she cut off his hair and he realized too late his last defiance against God's moral law he was supposed to be upholding.

Ironically, the Philistines put out his eyes and put him in prison.

But Samson's last act would be his greatest.^{iv}

He called upon God for strength – and he pushed over two support columns in a Philistine temple and the temple came crashing down, killing more Philistines along with himself than at any other time in his life.

Here's the wonderful news . . . your failure is never fatal.

And here's the point; Samson's demonstration of faith overcomes past failure.

4. The writer of Hebrews mentions Jephthah next.

His story is recorded in *Judges 11*.

He happened to be unwanted by the nation. Little wonder, given the fact that he was the illegitimate child of a prostitute. And she didn't want him either.

He literally grew up in the back alleys of eastern Syria – he was a dirty little street urchin.

About the time he's leading a notorious gang of undesirables trying to survive God's call for a courageous hero bypassed everyone and laid hands on him. And he valiantly accepted the call of God and led the Israelites to victory against the Ammonites.

Here's the point – **Jephthah's faith overturns his personal heritage.**

And for the person who might be wondering if God only wants people with a respectable family pedigree . . . Jephthah is God's visual aid that He will use anyone available and willing.

5. Next in line is David . . . no surprise there.

The heroic acts of David, demonstrating faith in God, began while he was still the runt of the litter – tending sheep.

Every Israelite knew the story of how David risked his life to defend the reputation of God against a giant named Goliath – and an army of Philistines.

1 Samuel 17 tells the story of that incredible, death defying act of faith.

I don't know about you, but I'm amazed sometimes to read what people are willing to risk their lives to accomplish.

It wasn't too long ago when I read some brief bios of several individuals who risked their lives by going over Niagara Falls.

Some of them survived – many did not.

Annie Taylor was actually the first person to try it in 1901. She was a retired school teacher. She was 63 years old but she claimed she was only 43. I could say more about that, but I won't!

Annie Taylor devised a modified pickle barrel and on her birthday, October 24th, cushioned with pillows and holding her cat, she went over the falls. Fortunately she survived – unfortunately her cat did too . . . you got to listen carefully.

After they pulled her out, she was quoted as saying, "No one ought ever do that again." But in 1930, George Stathakis did: he got into an even heavier barrel and went over the falls with his pet turtle inside, along for the ride. When it was over, only the turtle survived.

In more modern days, Jesse Sharp went over the falls in 1990 – in his kayak. He was an expert kayaker and was convinced that Niagara Falls, considered a class six rapids – could be conquered.

In fact, he was so confident that he even refused to wear a helmet – besides, he explained, a helmet would obscure his face from the cameras he knew would be waiting for him later.

The only thing they were able to find was his kayak.

As I read these accounts, I couldn't help repeating, "Why? Why?!"

Most of their friends and relatives reported that this was all they talked about . . . all they thought about. Some of them planned their stunt for years.

What a tragic, trivial cause to risk your own life on!

Listen, if you'd been on the side of that hill with the Israelite army, and you saw a young shepherd boy run into that valley toward a giant named Goliath, you'd have thought the same thing about David – what a tragic stunt . . . what a waste of life.

But this wasn't an act. There weren't any cameras around – David wasn't pulling anything to try and become famous.

He just happened to be deeply concerned enough about the fame of God that he exercised faith in His name and every bit of skill he'd ever learned throwing stones from a sling.

That encounter became for the nation – and every one of us today – an example of faith willing to impossible things – things that really did matter.

And here's the point: David's demonstration of faith overwhelmed personal impossibilities. Finally, the list ends with Samuel and the prophets – their testimony is recorded throughout much of the Old Testament

If you surveyed their lives, I think you could categorically define their faith as a **faith that overlooks pressure to conform.**

Prophets were different kind of warriors. They would preach and confront, not their enemies, but their families. They would speak to their own people.

It probably takes more faith to stand for Christ in front of your family and your co-workers and your friends than it does against your strangers or enemies.

For the most part, the prophets stood against their times and simply declared, "Thus sayeth the Lord."

Now in the next two verses the writer of Hebrews delivers in short sentence fragments nothing less than the history of Israel.

And I would agree with him, "We don't have time!"

One author commented that there are 9 fruits of the Spirit –and what you have here are 9 fruits of faith.

I'll comment briefly on each one.

Nine Fruits of Faith

1. The first fruit mentioned in *Hebrews 11:33* is **conquering kingdoms**

He could have been thinking of Joshua defeating the enemy kingdoms in the Promised Land or even David later defeating the Philistines.^v

2. **Secondly, they performed acts of righteousness** and . . .

He could have been thinking of Daniel who maintained his integrity for 75 years.

3. **Thirdly, they obtained promises.**

Performing acts of righteousness is faith living biblically; obtaining the promises is faith waiting biblically.

One author put it this way: performing acts of righteousness is faith behaving; obtaining the promises is faith, believing.^{vi}

And I'm not sure which one's the hardest – behaving or believing.

Actually, the hardest one is whatever it has to do at the moment.

That's why someone once said – and I can't remember who – that your greatest step of faith is your next one – no matter what it is.

4. **The fourth fruit of faith given here is a reference to shutting the mouths of lions.**

More than likely a reference to God's miraculous protection of Daniel in the lion's den – or as one author reworded it a little more correctly; you could actually say that it was the lions in Daniel's den.

Well put!

While you and I might not be thrown to lions don't overlook the fact that we're told the Devil is on the hunt – *he's even now walking around, like a roaring lion, seeking someone to discredit (I Peter 5:8).*

Every time you trust God – every time you do the right thing – every time you respond biblically –

every time you avoid the snare of temptation – you effectively shut the mouth of that old lion.

5. The fifth fruit of faith is quenching the power of fire.

The quenching of fire would be a reference perhaps to Daniel's three friends who were thrown into the fire, only to come out unsinged, unscathed and unharmed.

But we've also been told that our faith is our shield whereby we protect our lives from the fiery arrows of the evil one.

Those fiery darts dipped in temptation or impatience or unbelief or pain.

You might not be thrown into a fiery furnace – you might not be thrown into a den of lions, but every day you re-enter your world, whether you know it or not, you face the threat of a fire and a cunning lion.

You can't face either one without faith – believing and behaving.

6. The writer of Hebrews adds that faith delivered some from the edge of the sword.

In 1 Samuel 18 and Jeremiah 39, servants of the Lord escaped from certain death by the sword through the supernatural assistance of God.

7. A seventh fruit of faith is experienced by those who from weakness were made strong.

One of the benefits of growing older in the faith is that you discover just how weak you are, right?

Rather than growing more independent, the person of faith grows more dependent.

They've come to understand what Christ meant when He told His disciples, "Without Me you can do . . . a few things." Let me try that again . . . without me you can do some things."

Ok . . . say it with me - *Without me you can do nothing.* (John 15:5)

8. The eighth fruit – verse 34, they became mighty in war

Like Abraham and Joshua.

9. Number nine, they put foreign armies to flight.

Like Gideon and Joshua and Jonathan.

Now let me give you:

Four Abiding Observations from these brief memorials to the faith of the Old Testament believer.

1. First, if you studied these lives carefully, you'll discover that most demonstrations of faith come through surprised people.

Yes, they put their lives on the line, but do you think Gideon marched up that hill thinking . . . ah, the torch and the trumpet strategy – this works every time!

Acts of faith take place when there is no question who must perform the mighty deed – it has to be God.

Oh that God would give us a ministry – as a church family – reaching into our community and around the world in ways that can only be explained in terms of God's power and God's might and God's wisdom and God's leading.

Explainable only in the terminology of faith.

2. Secondly, some demonstrations of faith come through hesitant people.

Fearful people . . . these are people in Faith 101 who are always at the bottom of the class. They never seemed to get it . . . and then God chose to use them.

3. Thirdly, you'll notice that some demonstrations of faith come from inexperienced people.

Like Jephthah and Josiah and Esther and Ruth and a wagon load of others.

4. Finally, you'll notice that every demonstration of faith came through imperfect people

Don't miss this . . . you study their lives throughout the Old Testament and you'll discover that every one of these heroes had a flawed faith.

- Gideon failed to finish a life of faith.
- Barak failed to fully trust the Lord in faith.
- Jephthah foolishly boasted in his faith.
- Samson repeatedly lapsed in his faith.
- David failed to consistently lead in faith . . . and on and on.

And that's the point of the encouragement of this chapter – the Hebrew believers reading this chapter will immediately identify with the names here – why? Because they include those who were not strong – or consistent – or brave – or perfect . . . God was. While they were not faithful, God was. While they were not powerful or mighty, God was.

One of my favorite heroes of the faith lived out several challenging times to his young faith as he prepared for missionary service.

I've used Hudson Taylor often in illustrations, but never these two incidents that I came across last week as I was thumbing through his two volume biography I've marked all up and underlined here and there.

I'll close with this . . . or pretty shortly thereafter . . . I think.

Hudson wrote extensively to his sister. From those letters, I learned he had decided to prepare for the mission field by living off the smallest amount of money possible, as well as the least amount of food. He moved into the slums of London, even though he was apprenticed to a medical doctor as he prepared for his own license. He found that he could live off porridge and bread most of the week, with meat occasionally. He gave all his remaining money for medical supplies as he personally assisted the poverty stricken people in his neighborhood.

He had a problem though; the medical doctor he worked for often forgot to pay Hudson his weekly salary. Hudson had to remind him every week and it became so frustrating to Hudson that he finally decided to give it over to the Lord and trust the Lord to remind the doctor to pay him.

He felt that this would be a good way to develop his faith to simply trust the Lord to remind his boss to pay him.

Having made that pact with the Lord, the doctor didn't pay him again.

God didn't seem to be reminding him. Eventually, the rent was due and Hudson had no money to pay . . . his food was running out as well.

One Friday near closing time at the clinic, the Doctor again not having a clue that he owed Taylor another weeks salary, suddenly turned and said, "By

the way, Taylor, is not your salary due?" Hudson wrote, "I had to swallow two or three times before I could answer and I told him quietly that it was overdue for some time. How thankful I felt at this moment – God had heard my prayer.

The doctor replied, "Well, why didn't you remind me, you know how busy I am and I've just sent all the cash to the bank; otherwise, I would have paid you at once."

Eventually, Hudson headed to his apartment, grateful that his landlady would already be asleep and wouldn't be asking for the rent.

Saturday trudged along. Just when defeated and discouraged Hudson Taylor was about to lock the clinic up that night, the doctor suddenly appeared, rather amused that one of his clients had just come by his office and done something he'd never done before – paid him in cash.

The doctor couldn't understand what would possess his wealthy client to come by his office at 10:00 o'clock at night and pay a bill he could have paid anytime he wanted.

The doctor then gave Hudson a handful of banknotes and said I'll pay you the balance on Monday.

Oh what joy there was in this answered prayer of faith.

On another occasion, Hudson would write that his boss forgot to pay him again.

Hudson headed home discouraged and confused again with the Lord. The doctor had forgotten again and he didn't have much money left in his pocket.

When he arrived home, he was met by one of the poverty stricken men who lived near him in the slum district of London.

He begged Hudson to come and see his wife who had only recently delivered a baby; neither the mother nor the newborn were doing well. So Hudson reluctantly agreed – he wrote to his sister that he wasn't in the mood to help anybody that night. He was rather frustrated with God at the moment.

When he arrived at their apartment, several children were huddled inside this bare one room dwelling – he described it as wretched.

A woman was lying on a cot in the corner and a baby lay in her arms crying. Hudson knew without any examination that the baby wasn't getting any milk because the woman was malnourished. The entire family was simply hungry.

Hudson immediately knew that the Lord wanted him to give this family his remaining money, but his heart refused.

He told the family there was nothing he could do for them. He wrote his sister, “They needed comfort, but I did too. So I shared with them that although their circumstances were very distressing there was a kind and loving Father in heaven. But something in my cried, “You hypocrite – telling these unconverted people about a loving Father and not prepared to trust Him yourself. I was nearly choked.”

Hudson wrote that he resisted with stubbornness and frustration the obvious desire of God’s Spirit for him to completely trust the Lord and give the rest of him money away to this family.

He refused.

But he did agree to pray for them and they all knelt down in that little apartment. The battle raged in Taylor’s heart, and without any desire or joy, he got up, reached into his pocket and gave the man all his money. Only then, he wrote, did the joy of the Lord flood my heart.

I knew the poor woman’s life would be saved.

When he returned home, he ate his porridge and before he got into bed, he got on his knees and thanked the Lord that he had been empowered to give everything he had away and then reminded the Lord that he was out of money and food.

Later the next day, an anonymous package without a return address or name; the package contained a pair of winter gloves – and inside one of the gloves was 4 times the amount of money he had given away the night before.^{vii}

- How many of us would love to experience that kind of answer?
- How many of us would be willing to trust God for our income?

- How many of us would be willing to go to trust the Lord to remind your boss to pay you?
- How many of us would be willing to give away our last dollar to someone else in need?

We love the answers of God to acts of faith; we just don’t want to go through the agony of acting in faith.

And I’m so glad that Hudson Taylor struggled, too . . . as did Samuel and David and Gideon and every single believer who’s ever been honest enough to admit it.

Hudson Taylor in his later years, “I used to ask God to help me; then I asked Him if I might help Him; now I have reached the point where I ask Him simply to do His work, His way, through me.”

I simply cooperate . . . He does all the rest.

You see, when *that* takes place – when *we* cooperate – *faith* takes place . . . because our personal weakness does not prohibit our personal acceptance – our cooperation – with a personal assignment given to us from the hand of God.

What is it that you’re depending on God alone to fulfill? What is it that only God can provide for you – and you’re waiting on God alone to provide it.

And you’re praying with Peter, “Lord, increase my faith.”

Increase my faith.

So that, faith will be demonstrated through our weakness – as we personally accept – with hesitation; with questions; with uncertainty; with a sense of surprise when something happens – but we personally accept nonetheless some personal assignment from our faithful and living Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/9/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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i Charles R. Swindoll, The Practical Life of Faith (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 53

ii “Gettysburg Address” Microsoft © Encarta. 1994 Funk & Wagnall’s

iii Arthur W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews (Baker Book House, 1963), p. 848

iv Pink, p. 855

v Edgar Andrews, A Glorious High Throne (Evangelical Press, 2003), p. 396

vi Phillips, p. 169

vii Howard Taylor, Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: Volume 1 (OMF Book, 1996), p. 132