

Living in the Shadows

Heroes, Part 11

Hebrews 11:36-40

John Owen was born in 1616 and was a leader among Puritan pastors and authors. One man said that the Puritans were the redwoods in the forest of theology and that John Owen was the tallest tree among them.

Even Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the Great Awakening in the 1700's said that the writings of John Owen were to be valued above any other author, except of course, the scriptures.

John Owen entered Oxford at the age of 12 and graduated with his master's degree at the age of 19. He would go on to be greatly used by God – he was referred to as the “great doer”, because he accomplished so much.

He was famous, serving in the public spotlight. He was the chaplain to the King of England and a regular preacher before Parliament. But that didn't soften his convictions.

In fact, on one occasion, he preached before all of Parliament and rebuked them for fighting against Ireland rather than delivering the gospel to that country and their soldiers.

To put that into a contemporary setting – so that you can see just how courageous that was, that would be like the Chaplain of the United States Senate, getting up before all of Congress and rebuking them for fighting a war somewhere rather than delivering the gospel to that country and to those enemy soldiers.

Courageous . . . a man of faith . . . a preacher and author greatly used by God.

He would fit well within the major characters of Hebrews chapter 11; stories of courage and victory and progress and achievement.

But there's another side of John's Owen's story that many could miss – that wouldn't make it into the average church bulletin.

He struggled with a lack of consistency and times of barrenness spiritually. Writing to a friend he confessed, “I acknowledge unto you that I have a dry and barren spirit; I do heartily beg your prayers that in spite of my sinful inclinations, that God would water me from God.”

Another facet of John Owens life was his suffering. He and his wife, Mary, were married for 31 years. Together they had 11 children – all of them, except one, died at as young children. Only one child would grow to adulthood – a daughter. But she brought on only more suffering as she would divorce her husband, contract cancer, move back into the home of her parents where she died soon after.

John and Mary would experience the death of all 11 of their children – which averages out to losing one child every 3 years of marriage.

This couple literally walked in the valley of the shadow of death most of their lives!

Were they people of great faith? Or small?

You see, the question is, does your understanding of faith allow for both? Or would you say that faith is only viewed on the mountain top?

Is your concept of faith big enough to encompass both the triumphs and tragedies of life?ⁱ

Sufferings and victories . . . sin and grace . . . failure and progress.

Hebrews 11 has given us both.

People like Rahab and Samson and Gideon and David have found their way into this chapter of faith.

And for the most part, it's been good news.

In fact, by way of review, here's what we've learned about faith, so far:

1. We've learned that faith is our estimate of the character of God – in other words, faith is our statement of what we believe to be the faithfulness of God.
2. We also learned, early in chapter 11, that faith is our belief in the creating – power of God. Remember from verse 3 that God happens to be the first and foremost Hero of faith listed here.
3. We learned, thirdly, that faith is our adherence to the cross-centered – worship of God. And that was evidenced by Abel's blood sacrifice, as God had so prescribed.
4. We learned that faith is our willingness to communicate truths about God.

5. Fifth, we learned that faith is actually our obedience, despite obstacles and inexperience, to the word of God.
Noah had no ship building experience . . . and he virtually stood alone . . . motivated by his obedient faith in the directives of God.
6. Next, we learned that faith is our perseverance in spite of the scorn of unbelievers *and* the – silence of God.
7. Number seven, faith is walking into the unknown, and then waiting with nothing but the promises of God.
8. We also learned that faith is our abandonment of past desires, present delights, and future dreams out of loyalty to God.
9. Tied closely to that principle of faith was the next one observed in Hebrews 11: that faith is our willingness to forget the failure of the past and risk everything about our future in obedience to God.

Arthur Pink mentioned in his commentary that the missionary Robert Moffatt, who served for 50 years as a missionary in South Africa, spent a number of his early years without any spiritual fruit – not even one convert to Christianity. Some of his friends back home in England wrote him asking for him to specify some gift that they could send him to encourage him. He answered, “Send me a communion set.”ⁱⁱ

There wasn’t a church established . . . not even one response to Christ – send me a communion set. And when it arrived, months later, a dozen new believers gathered to observe the ordinance together.

10. The tenth observation we made was that faith is exercised when our weakness does not prohibit our acceptance of an assignment from God.
11. Then finally, and for our study today, faith is running the race, even when it looks like we’re losing.

If Hebrews 11 had stopped at verse 35, we might have the misconception that faith makes all of life victorious at some point or another.

That faith is all high fives and victory parties.

That the faithful always end up with the testimonies that end with success and glory and achievement.

Frankly, the Christian community is filled with mixed messages about faith . . . and some of them are best sellers.

Misconceptions like these:

- That faith will produce justice.
- That life won’t be hard – I mean, the really strong in faith are going to have a double duty angelic host around them, right?
- That faith will engender fearlessness. A person of faith never hides or even bats an eye.
- That faithfulness will lead to victory.
- That faith will increase trust, which guarantees the diminishing of trouble. Along with this same thought is the idea that the greater your trust in God the less trouble you’ll have in life.
- One more misconception; that faith will make pain and suffering an exception to the Christian experience.

Maybe that’s why it’s a shock to the system of the average Christian to wake up one day and discover that bad things can happen to forgiven people! Bad things can happen to faithful people.

The Shadows of Persecution

Hebrews 11 doesn’t end with verse 35 – it goes on to include in this final paragraph, the testimonies of people who lived under the shadows.

The Shadows of persecution . . . *look there at verse 36. And others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. 37. 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, ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy.*

These were people of faith? Absolutely!

You see, faith is being willing to run the race, even when it looks like you’re on the losing team.

Now what the writer of Hebrews does here is give us three categories of people who are living under the shadow of persecution.

1. The first group is those who were being abused.

Notice again *at verse 36. Others experienced – literally, received the trial of mockings*

You can recall the testimony of Nehemiah being mocked and scorned and accused by those who didn't want the city of Jerusalem rebuilt (Nehemiah chapter 4-6); or even Elisha being mocked by young men in 2 Kings 2.

Verbal scorn and abuse for running the race.

Imagine running a race and no one's cheering you on, but instead everyone jeering and mocking and ridiculing your faith.

That is the culture many Christians endure around the world today.

I can't help but think of Athanasius, the early church leader who defended the deity of Jesus Christ against the false teachings of some who argued that Christ was simply a human being, glorified only because of his godly life. This was the 4th Century beginning of what would be repackaged many times over the centuries; in recent year by Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

Athanasius was literally banished from his home in Alexandria five different times, spending a total of 17 years in exile. At one point, one story goes that he was often alone throughout his 50 years of defending the equality of Christ's deity with that of God the Father that he was once told, "Athanasius, the whole world is against you." To which he replied, "Then Athanasius is against the whole world."ⁱⁱⁱ

He kept the true gospel . . . the true faith, when it meant he stood alone.

Little wonder he was nicknamed "The Saint of Stubbornness."^{iv}

You're thinking, that's my spiritual gift . . . I can qualify to be a saint too!

Saints of Stubbornness . . .

The writer of Hebrews goes on to add here the trial of scourgings.

Of course this goes beyond verbal attacks to literal physical abuse.

Scourging is a word referring to the whip with long leather strands; each strand having a rock or metal fragment bound at each tip. It literally tore into flesh and bone.

Scourging was called the 'half-death' simply because by the time it was over, the victim was nearly dead.

You can't help but read the beginning of this list of abuse and think of the Author and Finisher of our faith – the Lord Jesus – who endured both verbal mocking and derision along with such terrible scourging and beating that he was literally unrecognizable.

Who gave Himself for us, to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession . . . (Titus 2:14)

The writer of Hebrews adds one more descriptive phrase of abusive treatment upon the innocent – he adds at ***the end of verse 36, "and yes, also chains and imprisonment.***

These Hebrew believers would have thought back to Joseph – unfairly imprisoned; or Jeremiah, the prophet – imprisoned for telling the truth to his own King and to his own people.

Keep in mind these people of faith suffered abuse, *not* because they lacked faith, but *because* they demonstrated faith!

Their obedience to God made their lives painful . . . not pleasant.

2. Now the second category of those who live under the shadows of persecution are those who experience martyrdom.

He writes in ***verse 37, They were stoned*** – that is, rocks were thrown at them at close range in order to kill them. You didn't need any weapons . . . any swords . . . a hangman's noose and a convenient tree nearby . . . just rocks on the ground.

Like Naboth in 1 Kings 9 who was falsely accused by King Ahab and his wife Jezebel and stoned to death; or Jeremiah the prophet, Jewish tradition has held, was eventually executed by stoning; or like Stephen in the New Testament era after his first and only sermon declaring the deity and glory of Jesus Christ, in Acts chapter 7 . . . stoned to death.

The writer adds, "***they were sawn in two***" – Jewish tradition for centuries has held that Isaiah was eventually hunted down by King Manasseh for having dared to deliver the word of God's judgment against Israel; he at first escaped and hid in a hollow tree, but was discovered and the King ordered the tree sawed in half with Isaiah inside it.^v

The language here in Hebrews seems to reference that particular martyrdom, although there are other testimonies from church history of believers being dismembered and tortured for their faith.

The writer goes on to add ***they were tempted*** – more than likely a reference to being tempted to recant their faith in order to save their lives; and those who didn't – he adds here, ***they were put to death by the sword.***

History is filled with such cases.

I have read that there are sixty catacombs near Rome, covering more than 600 miles of tunnels and galleries underground. These tunnels or catacombs are about eight feet high and from three to five feet wide, with rows of long recessed areas built off to the side. The deceased were placed in these recesses which were then closed or covered by a marble slab or large tiles. When Christian's graves were later opened to be explored, their skeletons many times told the terrible tale of the Roman persecution. Heads are severed from bodies; ribs and shoulder blades were broken, bones were blackened from fire.^{vi}

The St. Petersburg Times covered the story of a Ukrainian man who was mauled by a lioness at the Kiev Zoo. He encountered the animal on purpose, believing that God would protect him.

He lowered himself by a rope into a concrete enclosure holding four lions. He then walked toward them, shouting, "God will save me, if He exists." One lioness came toward him, knocking him to the ground and severing his carotid artery as a huge crowd helplessly watched from above.^{vii}

Was his faith not big enough?

You're thinking – of course that's not the issue . . . no one should test God like that!

There happen to be people in our country – in our own state of North Carolina – handling rattle snakes in their worship services out of conviction that their faith will keep them alive if they're bitten.

There are even more people in our country who refuse medication believing that to do so would be an insult to their faith in a true and living God.

There are millions of Christians who are confronted with a crisis of unbelief in God because He did not rescue them from danger or disability or difficulty or perhaps the death of a loved one.

They might not say it out loud, but they're hearts are crying – "If God exists, He will save me from this or that!"

Did it ever occur to you that you're not alone in that kind of crisis . . . the truth is, the human heart naturally wonders where God went . . . like Job . . . where has God gone . . . I want an audience with God!

God hasn't gone anywhere.

That's why He's pulling back the curtain a little further in Hebrews 11. We know He's here in the **first part of the chapter** – walls are tumbling down and seas are parting and the dead are rising.

Well, He's here in **the last part of the chapter** as well. He's just in the shadows.

Russel Lowell penned it so well when he wrote,
That it seems that truth is always on the scaffold
And wrong always seems to be seated upon the throne

*...Yet behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own^{viii}*

When you live in the sunshine, God is with you – and we know that; when you live in the shadows, God lives there too.

And sometimes we forget that.

He's even now walking with His beloved through the valley of the shadow of death.

Faithful believers throughout the ages have experienced the suffering of being abused . . . of being martyred . . . now thirdly, the writer of Hebrews includes:

3. Those who were ignored and abandoned.

Notice the middle part of verse 37. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins.

In other words, they had no other material for clothing – not silk or cotton or linen – nothing but the poorest of the poor . . . the dried leather skins of sheep and goats.

He goes on to describe them as ***destitute, afflicted, ill-treated***

The Greek language uses the present tense for these participles –

- ***they were constantly destitute*** – which means they didn't know where their next drink of water or food would come from;
- ***they were constantly afflicted*** – a word for pressed hard – under great stress and pressures from trying to survive;
- ***they were constantly ill-treated***, which can be rendered, tormented or oppressed.^{ix}

They are literally driven away from their homes – they are not only abandoned, but disowned.

Notice the last part of **verse 38. *They wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.***

In other words, they are reduced to the most basic form of living possible, finding refuge in some cave or some kind of crude dwelling literally dug into the ground.

- David hid out in the wilderness from King Saul (1 Samuel 22);

- Obadiah fed prophets who were hiding out in a cave (1 Kings 18)
- Elijah ran for his life and hid in a cave from Jezebel's assassins (1 Kings 19)
- We know from history that Christians hid in the catacombs of Rome during years of persecution.^x

Reduced to the barest forms of existence.

Are they losers or what?!

Look again – *verse 38 – of whom the world was not worthy!*

Disowned by their own people . . . adopted by their Heavenly Father!

Ignored by their world . . . loved by their Savior!

No home for them on earth . . . what a splendid, magnificent home, in heaven.

Of whom the world wasn't worthy – that's another way of saying, It isn't at all what it looks like!

This text is telling us that their story and yours does not here . . . they actually do win – we all win!

Some are called by Him to win by living; others are called to win by dying.^{xi}

Some are called to win through triumph; others are called to win through tragedy.

Paul would say, *To live is Christ, but to die is gain (Philippians 1:21)*

Listen, were the martyred missionaries, Nate Saint and Jim Elliott losers or winners?

Did the cause of Christ lose? Or win?

Is the cause of Christ losing in China, in Vietnam, in North Africa, in Pakistan, in North Korea?

Was God winning when Christ stood before Pilate? When He hung on a cross?

Was He losing? Or winning?

It all depends on where you stop the story.

Hebrews 11 tells you the story isn't over yet.

Who won 19 centuries ago – the Apostle Paul, or the Emperor Nero?

Depends on where you stop the story.

And we've lived long enough so that in our world to this day, parents name their sons Paul and their dogs Nero.^{xii}

Who was winning – Hitler, or Corrie Ten Boom.

Who, along with thousands of women, entered the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. A believer, incarcerated for aiding Jews escaping from the Nazi death camps, Corrie was now among them. She was able to smuggle a small Bible into the camp and at night, she would one day tell her story, that Bible became an ever-widening circle of help and hope.

Like beggars clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its warmth and light. She wrote that on December 31, 1944, by a clerical error and the will of God, I was released. Already 52 years old, she would spend the rest of her single life traveling, testifying – and this was one of her favorite statements – that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.^{»xiii}

Tell me . . . who won?

The Shadows of Promise

Were they losers? Notice what *verse 39 writes of them – 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 – or complete.*

What's he saying?

First, they weren't losers – they were overcomers.

Secondly, they're story isn't completed without us.

In other words, they looked forward to promises yet fulfilled – the promised Messiah whose death on the cross would complete – perfect – their redemption.

We look back to the finished work of Christ – but they, in the Old Testament, had to look forward.

And we've had it so much better – why? We know so much more than they did.

We have a completed Revelation . . .

We've been given the historical facts of Christ's coming and dying and resurrecting; we have both Old Testament and New Testament.

We live in the full disclosure of the sunlight of God's word – they lived in the shadows of promises yet fulfilled.

But it was enough – and what a testimony to their faith.

- they didn't have Matthew through Revelation
- they had no written description of the Father's House
- the tree of life and the glorious new earth and heaven
- they knew nothing of the Bema seat where they would be rewarded for their labor of love and their acts of faith;
- they knew nothing of the sound of that final satisfaction when Jesus Christ said, "It is finished"

- they knew little or nothing of the Holy Spirit Whom we depend on to get through another day

That's the point here – if they could trust God with so little . . . what will we do with having it so much better?

John Calvin, the reformer wrote on this text, All *they* had was a tiny spark of light to lead them to heaven; but we have the Sun of righteousness shining on us . . . what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?^{xiv}

They persevered and they didn't know half what we know!

But they so encourage us by their faith – not in their triumphs, but in their tribulations . . . and how they trusted God.

One author wrote this – these ancient saints form our spiritual family tree; without them, we have no roots; with us, they have no branches. They are “made perfect” – or completed – as the life-giving sap of their lives flows through our spiritual leaves and flowers, [we together] fill the earth with the fragrance of faith.^{xv}

It's the testimony of a martyr from India or China or Rome who infuses our hearts with courage today;

It's the faithfulness of God in the shadows of ancient history that brings a ray of sunshine to our path today;

It's the testimony of losing all 11 children in death that brings hope to the heart of the believer whose lost something precious today;

It's the struggle of a hymn writer living 200 years ago who fashions just the perfect words for our hearts today we sang recently.

This past Christmas, most of our family of cousins, aunts and uncles, brothers, sisters-in-law, parents, grandparents, nephews and nieces – we all convened at the home of one of my younger brothers because of his brain cancer and inability to travel. His tumor has spread . . . his pain is increasing . . . the recent MRI's showed the white film of cancer

now in both hemispheres. Still lucid . . . still fighting . . . still funny and sarcastic . . .

Still trusting . . . still singing . . . still verbalizing that God is worth following in the sunshine and in the shadows.

We had made a huge circle of sorts to pray when he said, “Let's sing – and he began to lead us in singing,

*Great is thy faithfulness, Oh God my father;
There is not shadow of turning with Thee.*

Interesting isn't it that the One who reigns in the shadows never has even a shadow or hint of changing – He's always faithful.

The lyrics continue like this:

*Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not
As Thou has been, Thou forever wilt be.*

*Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed – not, all I have wanted . . .*

*Thy hand hath provided
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.
–Thomas O. Chisholm*

It's true for all these in Hebrews 11 who lived in the sunshine. It's true for all those who lived in the shadows. It's true for you and it's true for me.

Faith is running the race, even when it looks like we're losing – and we're *not!* It all depends on where you stop the story.

Don't stop now . . . don't stop now . . . it doesn't end here.

It ends when, among other things, our racing is exchanged with our reigning – reigning with our coming, conquering King.

The story is not over until God writes the final word!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/6/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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