

The Faith That Overcomes

The Triumph of Faith – Part VII

Hebrews 11:30-40

Introduction

We have studied:

- The worship of faith, as we have looked at Abel;
- The walk of faith, as we have discovered truths from the life of Enoch;
- The work of faith, as we have studied the life of Noah;
- The abandonment of faith, as we have seen Abraham leaving all he had to go to an unknown, uncharted land;
- The plan of faith, as we have looked at Moses.

Now, it seems, the writer of Hebrews 11 brings things to a quick close. He begins like a machine gun in rapid succession, listing name after name. We could not even begin to cover all of the truths about faith that this gives to us.

However, we are taking this chapter verse by verse, and certainly want to give these people the place they deserve because they are included. We will begin today, with Hebrews 11:30.

These stories will perhaps, bring to your mind things that you learned in Sunday school. The writer begins by recording a familiar story.

Illustrations of Triumph

Look at Hebrews 11:30.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

Joshua and Rahab at Jericho

We need to go back in our minds to Joshua chapter 6, where the people of Israel are facing their very first obstacle as they enter the promised land. However, we soon discover that their first obstacle is not Jericho.

- The first obstacle for the Israelites was a test of belief.

This massive frontier city stood with its walls stretching toward the sky. It was supposedly a city that was impregnable, yet this is where God begins the trek into the land of Canaan.

So the Israelites march up to Jericho and God tells them, “Here is the plan that I want you to follow to overcome this city.”

You may remember this story. The priests were to carry the ark. In front of them were the guards and behind them were the rest of the army. Behind that rear guard were all the million or more people of Israel.

How foolish it must have seemed to these people to be circling this city. They were supposed to do it thirteen times. Once a day for six days, and on the seventh day, seven times.

Imagine being there on top of that wall looking down. You would say, “What’s going on down there?”

One of the Israelites might say, “We’re overcoming your city.”

“How?”

“We’re going to march around it one time for six days each.”

“That’s frightening! Is that all?”

“Well, on the seventh day, we’re going to do it seven times in a row.”

“Please stop, you’re scaring me! Then what?”

Can you imagine this story?!

“Well, then our priests are going to blow on the trumpets – and the walls are going to fall down.”

“Right!”

This is the reason I suggested to you that the first obstacle was not Jericho, but a test of belief. They

followed through on the command of God and, of course, the walls fell.

- This was not only a test of belief for the Israelites, but a test of patience.

If we looked at Joshua 6, which we will not take time to do, we would discover that God said, “Every time you walk around that city, I don’t want you to say a word. March around it six times without uttering one word to your neighbor or those around you.”

Can you imagine thirteen trips around a city, patiently not saying a word?

- This was also a test of courage for the people of Israel.

It would take great risk and almost seemingly foolish courage to march around the city in this manner.

This reminds me of a story that I read recently of Robert Moffat, who served as a missionary for years in South Africa, more than a century ago. He served for many years without any converts. Finally, his friends wrote from England and asked if they could send a present to him and to please tell them what he would like. He wrote back, “Certainly. Would you please send a communion set?”

Now his friends knew that no one had followed Christ among the natives, yet they complied. By the time the set left England and reached South Africa, Moffat was ready. He served communion to six natives who had come to Christ.

This is the risk and seemingly foolish courage of faith.

The writer continues in Hebrews 11 to give another story surrounding this incident in Jericho. Look at Hebrews 11:31.

By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Now for one thing, it is strange that Rahab would be included in this account of Hebrews 11. Her occupation was that of a harlot. She ran a brothel on top of the city wall.

However, it is even more surprising that Rahab would end up in this account because she was a Canaanite; more specifically, from the tribe known as the Amorites. They were a cruel people that God, according to Genesis 15, had marked for judgment. He said the Amorites would die.

You may remember that the Israelites spies came into the land and were housed by Rahab. She would say to them, in Joshua chapter 2, “I know that your God is the God of heaven and the God of earth.”

Rahab had heard the reports and had believed God.

Rahab’s people were especially cruel. In fact, in Hebrews 11:31, we read,

. . . Rahab . . . did not perish along with those who were disobedient . . .

Everyone in the city of Jericho had heard the news, yet they disobeyed what they knew was going to happen; they disobeyed the word of God and were marked for judgment. The historians write that these people were so cruel that they would often put babies in jars and build them into the walls of their cities and allow them to die, calling them foundation sacrifices to their gods. They were begging for God’s judgment.

Rahab, however, believed and followed the message of the spies. She was not only spared, but honored. She would become the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth. She would also become the great, great grandmother of David. In fact, this converted harlot would become an ancestor in the line of Jesus Christ. Oh, the grace of God!

Six more men listed in Hebrews 11

The writer of Hebrews begins now to list several people. It is almost as if he throws his hands up and says in Hebrews 11:32, “What more shall I say? How can I ever give you the entire list? But let me give the names of six more men.”

He then lists six men: a farmer, an outlaw, a judge, a general, a king, and a prophet.

1. The first man is a farmer named Gideon.

We read in Hebrews 11:32a,

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, . . .

We learn Gideon’s story from Judges chapters 6 and 7. He was a frightened farmer who was hiding in the wine press. God called him to captain the armies. He was so unsure that God really wanted him to do this that he said, “God, would You show me a sign?”

God says, “All right, I want you to build an altar.”

So Gideon built an altar with stones and put an animal on it. Then, an angel of the Lord came down

and, with a stick, simply touched the animal and it burst into flame and consumed the sacrifice.

Gideon thought, “Maybe that was a little easy for God. I’ll tell you what I’ll do – I’ll put out a fleece. Lord, if I wake up tomorrow morning and this fleece is wet and all the ground on the threshing floor is dry, then I’ll know.”

Gideon woke up the next morning and wrung a bowl full of water out of the fleece and all the ground was dry. So this great man of faith thought, “Well, Lord, maybe that was too easy, so let’s do it again. But this time, let’s change it around. This time, let’s allow the fleece to be dry and the ground to be wet.”

As you may remember, Gideon woke up the next morning and this was the case. This farmer then mustered up all the courage he could and captained the armies of God to victory.

However, this is not all of his story. In fact, it seems as if God is picking on this poor farmer because He tells him to collect all of the soldiers. He does – 32,000 of them. Then God says, “No, you might take the credit for the battle. Whittle it down to 10,000.”

Gideon does this, but his knees are knocking. Then, God says, “This is still too many. Take them to the river and notice who bellies up to the water with no concern about approaching enemies and who, instead, kneels and collects water with his hand – watching all the time for those who might come to fight.”

So 9,700 of the 10,000 men belly up to the water. Gideon is probably running around saying, “No! No! On your knees, on your knees, please!!”

Gideon ends up with 300 men.

This army must have some secret weapon; some nuclear arsenal in their bag. No. God says, “Your instruments for this battle are to be trumpets and lanterns.”

What is the point? The point is:

Faith overshadows reason.

2. The second man is an outlaw named Barak.

The writer of Hebrews continues on to mention another man. He says, in Hebrews 11:32, “You remember, as well, Barak.”

I had to do some studying on this fellow. I had hardly heard of him.

Barak appears in Judges chapters 4 and 5. He was an outlaw hiding out in a city of refuge when Deborah

the Judge gave him a message from God. She said to this fugitive, “Barak, God wants you to captain the armies and fight against the warlord Sisera.”

This proud fugitive, I am sure, would have loved the glory of a certain victory. God said that he would win, so this was having your cake and eating it too! Barak says, “Sure, Lord, I’ll do it. And one day, they’ll proclaim my name as the victorious general!”

However, God said, “There is one catch – you can’t take any credit for the battle, Barak. As a matter of fact, you will not slay Sisera, which is usually the privilege of the overcoming general. A woman will kill Sisera.”

Barak swallowed perhaps, his fleshly thoughts, and said, “Okay, God, I will obey Your command and go into battle, not taking any credit or any victory or any glory unto myself.”

What is the point? The point is:

Faith overpowers pride.

3. The third man is a judge named Samson.

The writer of Hebrews mentions a judge in Hebrews 11:32, by the name of Samson. We know Samson’s story from Judges chapters 13 through 16. He is a man who is not remembered for his faith, as much as for his foolishness.

However, interestingly enough, Samson never denied that God was the source of his power. He never took the credit for himself.

As you may remember, he lay in the lap of a seductress and told her the story that his hair was the symbol that God gave him power through his long hair. As he slept, she cut his hair. Then the Philistines overcame Samson, gouged out his eyes, and forced him to ground meal as if he were an animal.

Finally, however, the day came – we do not know much time had passed – the Philistines, for sport, brought Samson out onto the porch of the temple that was built in honor of their god Dagon. Here was the mighty judge of Israel. You may remember that Samson wrapped his arms around two pillars and said, “Oh, Lord, may they see Your strength in me.” God answered.

What is the point? The point is:

Faith overcomes failure.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are not building your faith upon your perfection. It is based upon your perception – understanding that *God* is the source of

power. *God* is sovereign and He will use whom He will.

4. The fourth man is a general named Jephthah.

The writer of Hebrews mentions a fourth man in Hebrews 11:32, by the name of Jephthah. His story is in Judges 11. Again, I had to pull out my dictionary and do a little studying. Let me give the results of this study.

Jephthah was a man who was an illegitimate son of a prostitute. He was unloved and rejected by his mother and relatives. He grew up in the back alleys of eastern Syria – a little, dirty street urchin.

Finally, one day, Jephthah heard the message of God and decided to follow it. God would take that little boy and raise him to be a general of the armies of Israel and to be one of Israel's judges.

Jephthah appears only briefly in scripture, yet long enough, I think, to teach this lesson to us:

Faith overrules an ungodly heritage.

This reminds me of a story that I read, written by Howard Hendricks. It gave an interesting insight into his life. He writes the following words.

As a boy, I lived in a neighborhood in North Philadelphia, in which they said an evangelical church could never be planted. But God led a small army of Christians to band together and start a church.

One man in the church, by the name of Walt, had a sixth grade education and had been raised on the streets. Walt told the Sunday school superintendent that he wanted to start a Sunday school class, but was told there wasn't an opening – and there wasn't. Walt persisted and finally was told, "Go out and get a class for yourself. Anybody you can find, you can teach."

Hendricks then writes:

Then Walt came to my neighborhood. The first time we met, I was playing marbles on the sidewalk. Walt said, "Son, would you like to go to Sunday school?"

I was not interested. Besides, anything that had the word "school" in it was bad news.

"How about a game of marbles?" he asked.

That was different. We shot marbles and had a great time, even though Walt beat me in every single game. By then, I would have followed him anywhere.

Walt picked up and taught a total of thirteen boys. Nine of these boys came from broken homes. Today,

eleven of the thirteen are serving full time with different Christian organizations and churches.

Faith overrules an ungodly heritage.

5. The fifth man is a king named David.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to mention a very well-known character in the Old Testament, whose name is David. David is mentioned in Hebrews 11:32 in light of his faith. I have to think that perhaps the writer is thinking of his best known feat of faith when he was a little runt of a shepherd boy.

Young David came out to where the battle between the armies of the Israelites and the Philistines was going on. He would see a giant approaching and mocking the name of God. David would say, "Why isn't anyone going out there and taking him on? I'll do it."

So this little shepherd boy, with only a small slingshot, goes out to face the well-armed giant. I love the words in I Samuel 17:46, and I cannot help but chuckle when I think of little David pointing his finger at this more than nine feet tall guy, saying,

This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. . . .

I would love to have seen this. I would imagine Goliath is doubled over in laughter.

While Goliath is laughing, David is loading his slingshot – and lets fly a perfect shot, striking this giant between the eyes. He falls stunned to the ground and David runs up, takes Goliath's own sword out of its sheath, and severs his head.

What is the point? The point is:

Faith overwhelms impossibilities.

6. The sixth man is a prophet named Samuel, and he is mentioned along with the other prophets.

The writer of Hebrews wraps up this rapid-fire succession of names in Hebrews 11:32, by giving two more – Samuel and the prophets. I have lumped them together because they are a different kind of warrior. They did not fight against Philistines, Amalekites, or Amorites; they fought against more deadly enemies of immorality and idolatry. They would persist, even though it meant they would preach, not to their enemies, but to their families; not to people they hated, but to people they loved.

This is when faith has to be tough. I think it often takes more courage to stand up to friends and relatives than to enemies.

What is the point of the prophets? The point is:

Faith overcomes pressure and fear.

Now the writer of Hebrews continues in the next few verses to mention different events that remind the reader of people without giving their names. Look at Hebrews 11:33.

who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

Perhaps “shut the mouths of lions” is a reference to Daniel. Continue to Hebrews 11:34.

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.

What a list! I think our modern Bibles would put a period at this point and say, “That’s enough. This is my kind of faith! This is the kind of Christianity I want – triumph!”

Illustrations of Tragedy

The writer of Hebrews does not stop at this point, however. He begins illustrations, one after another, of tragedy.

Did these people fail God? No.

Did God fail them? No.

These people, in this latter group, would glorify God in enduring. The others glorified God in escaping. These would glorify God in their tragedy. The former group would glorify God through their triumph.

We have a popular misconception in modern day America, and preachers are great at saying it. They say, “If God did it for me, I know He will do the same for you.”

Bologna! This implies that God always works the same way in similar instances.

However, this cannot even hold up to the scriptural record. For example, James and Peter are in jail about the same time. James is beheaded, while Peter is allowed to escape miraculously into the night – an angel opened the prison doors.

My friend, God warns about comparing our spiritual experiences with other people. In fact, He

says that if you compare yourselves with other believers, you are not wise.

Even a doctor will warn, “Do not take medicine prescribed to someone else.”

Be careful that you do not train your telescope on some other believer, but train it on the Holy Sovereignty of God. God does not work the same way in similar instances. There is no such thing as carbon copy Christianity.

Faith will cause some to live. Faith may cause some to die.

The Hebrews writer goes on to give illustrations. Notice Hebrews 11:35.

. . . and others were tortured . . .

This word “tortured,” in the Greek, I am afraid, is frighteningly vivid. It is the word “tumpanizo,” from which we get our word “timpani,” which is a kettledrum used in orchestras. The implication is that the torturers would take their victim and stretch them over a large drum-like instrument and then, beat them to death with drumsticks and clubs.

Hebrews 11:35 goes on to say,

. . . and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;

What does the writer mean by “a better resurrection”? I think he is referring back to the beginning of this verse, Hebrews 11:35a, which says,

Women received back their dead by resurrection; . . .

Some women received back their dead by resurrection. However, this is not all that good because they would have to die again.

The people who were martyrs, never died again. They received, once for all, a better resurrection.

The writer says, in Hebrews 11:36a,

And others experienced mockings and scourgings, . . .

Perhaps this is a reference to the prophets who would face the scorn and mocking of those who would attack them.

I am a history buff, especially of church history, and often read of men and women who gave their lives for the cause of Jesus Christ. It is so convicting. These are people who lived when the church was persecuted.

We live when the church is pampered. There is a tremendous difference.

I read, this week, of two martyrs who experienced this better resurrection. They were tied to the same stake during the reign of Bloody Mary. One man was blind and the other was lame. As the lame man was led to the stake and tied to it, he first tossed his crutch away and then, turned to the blind companion in death and said, “Don’t be afraid, this fire will cure us both.”

Bradford, another martyr, said to his fellow sufferer at the stake, “Take heart, for tonight we’ll have a merry supper with the Lord.”

This is faith.

Hebrews 11:36 mentions those who have received scoffing and mocking. In the People’s Republic of China the atheistic government does not allow anyone to have any kind of belief system at all until they are eighteen or older. I read an account that there are at least thirty million home churches meeting underground. Last week, I read that the government of China is beginning an onslaught to stamp out the home churches in China.

Perhaps, even at this very moment, there are those who are being led away to chains and imprisonment. Do not pray for them – they are going to receive a better resurrection. In fact, they pray for us, as we live in such prosperity.

Look at Hebrews 11:37a.

They were stoned . . .

Perhaps this is a reference to Stephen.

Continue in Hebrews 11:37.

. . . they were sawn in two, . . .

Tradition says that the prophet Isaiah was taken by his captors, and because he would not recant or cease his preaching, they laid him on a table, took a saw, and literally, cut him in half. Perhaps this reference in Hebrews is to this prophet of faith.

Look at the next phrase in Hebrews 11:37.

. . . they were tempted, . . .

Notice this. It is a strange thing to think that before this, it is mentioned that people were being sawn in two and after this that people were being put to death with the sword. In this part, it just says that people were being tempted.

I think the word “tempted” implies that people were tempted to recant lest they die.

This reminds me of the story of the three Hebrew children, in Daniel 3. You may remember that they were told that either they would bow down to the golden image or they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. They were tempted to recant; they were tempted to turn away from the God of Israel and follow the golden image, lest they die.

I love what they said, in Daniel 3:17-18, and I wrote it down so that I could read it to you.

. . . our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

We should read this more often. They had the understanding that just because they believed in God did not mean they were shielded from calamity; from tragedy.

Bad things can happen to forgiven people.

We have the idea that if we live faithful lives, God puts a double duty angelic host about us so we never experience tragedy. This is not so.

Is our faith deep enough to say, like these children, “Even if God does not deliver us, we still will follow Him.”

Let us finish Hebrews 11:37b-38.

. . . they were put to death with the sword, they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

You mean to tell me the world was not even worthy to host these people? Look at them – dirty, wretched, lonely, living in holes in the ground.

God says, “They are My choicest servants. They are My little ones of faith.”

Application

Let me apply this entire chapter of Hebrews to us in two ways, as I have studied it. Let me give two applications that I have gleaned from studying chapter 11 of Hebrews with you.

1. First, I have already intimated, faithful Christians can and will experience both tragedy and triumph.

As our church gets larger and more people come in, we will find that in this assembly, there are people suffering and there are people rejoicing at the same time.

There may be someone who has experienced the joy of a loved one who has just been told by the doctor's report that the cancer has been erased; there is no trace of it. The doctors scratch their heads and say that it must be spontaneous remission, but you know it is a miracle. There may also be someone who has just lost a loved one to cancer.

There may be someone exalting in the promotion they received at their job. There may be another who has just been let go from their job.

It is possible to be faithful to God and experience both extremes – tragedy and triumph.

Let me give one more application, which is so precious to my heart. Do not forget this. As we have studied and surveyed this entire chapter of Hebrews, I think the writer had this point in mind.

2. Secondly, remembering is often the first step of faith.

These Hebrew believers were teetering on the brink of turning their backs on God. The writer says, "Don't forget all those before you. Don't forget those who lived and died for the cause. It's worth it! Remember."

My friend, if you are teetering on the brink of turning your back on God; if you are on the brink of saying "No" to what this book says and doing things your way, do not forget all those who came before you.

Hebrews chapter 12 goes on to say of Jesus Christ, "Do you remember Him? He despised the shame; He hated the shame, yet He endured the cross. Consider Him, lest you lose heart and give up." (Hebrews 12:2-3)

Jesus came to earth with a cause. Obviously He knew that there would be people without Him. He died with a purpose and rose with a purpose.

This, in a way, reminds me of October 16, 1555, which was a day the world would consider a tragic waste for two men. However, in the light of church history, we now thank these men for the way that they stood for their conviction.

Two reformers, by the names of Latimer and Ridley, were burned together at the stake in Oxford, for their adherence to the faith. When the first piece of

wood was lit and laid at the feet of Ridley, Latimer, as recorded by the historian, turned to him and said, "Be of good cheer, and play the man, Mr. Ridley! We are today, about to light a candle that I trust, by the grace of God, will never be put out."

So it was, they did indeed, light a candle that has been burning in hearts from then until now. It burns in the hearts of everyone who, by faith, follows God, whether through tragedy or triumph; sorrow or joy; pain or comfort. It burns in the hearts of those who are willing to say, "God, whatever the cost, I will obey Your word. Regardless of the circumstances; regardless of consequences, I will follow You."

This, my friend, is the courage; this is the vision; this is the perception of faith when we say to God, "We will follow You."

Oh God, give us hearts, give us the vision, give us the insight of faith.