

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Characters of Faith – Hebrews 11:32-40 (Part 8b)

Hebrews 11:32-38

32 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, 33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 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. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; 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 38 (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

It might do us well this morning to begin with a bit of a history lesson. Now I know that not everyone is “into” history, but I believe that in order to properly appreciate what is being said in our text, we must have some grasp on what was taking place in and around this little congregation of Christian Hebrews. To begin with, I would draw your attention back to Hebrews 10:32-33. There we read,

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured [present generation] a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

In other words, some in this congregation being addressed had recently endured a great persecution or at least were directly acquainted with someone, friend or family, that had been so ill-treated. So then, what kind of conflict, reproaches, and tribulations had these experienced?

Let me remind you that the book of Hebrews was written about 68 AD, about 35 years since the resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and the beginning of the church age. We have much information concerning the events of the Roman Empire at this time. Let me fill you in. In 54 AD, a new Emperor took control of the Roman Empire, a man who was originally noted for his kindness and yet would become one of the cruelest of men, so cruel in fact that even his eventual persecution of the Christians would be questioned by the masses of the Empire. The beginning of what is known as the first general persecution of the Christian church outside of the Jews own attempts to squelch Christianity began in 64 AD, just about 3 or 4 years before the book of Hebrews was penned. Rome had been set on fire and Nero, the Emperor, initially showed little concern for the fire that lasted nine days and burned to ashes nearly 2/3rds of the city. In fact, Nero had composed and song about the fire that raised suspicions among the people that maybe he had set it himself. Concerned about public

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opinion, Nero, needing a scapegoat, and diverted the anger of the people against him by accusing a sect of the Jews, a group called Christians, of setting the city aflame. So then, starting about 64 AD, the pagan citizens of Rome hunted out the Christians and killed great numbers of them in a terrible persecution that lasted four years, for the rest of Nero's reign through 68 AD; which again is about the time of the writing of his letter to the Hebrews. Many Christians lost their lives during this, the first general persecution of Christianity.

It is important to consider the great variety of punishments Nero used against the Christians. He had some sewed up in the skins of wild beasts, and then turned savage dogs loose on them until they were chewed to pieces. Other Christians were dressed in shirts dipped in wax (or pitch), tied to poles, and set on fire in Nero's garden. Many were shot with arrows, run through with swords and many others were thrown into the arena, where they were killed by savage lions and other wild beasts.

Among the many who died in this persecution were both Peter and Paul, who were martyred as a result of Nero's cruelty. In the last year of his reign, again about 68 AD, tradition holds that Nero had Peter crucified with his head downward, because Peter said he was unworthy to die the same way Christ did. Also in that year the Apostle Paul was beheaded at Rome.

This is the backdrop, the setting behind the letter to the Hebrews. It may well have been fresh in the hearts and minds of those in this Hebrew congregation the recent death of Peter and Paul along with loved ones of their own who had become victims of Nero's wrath. So then, as we consider this list of the triumphs and trials of the faithful in the closing verses of Hebrews 11, we see not only allusions to Old Testament events and people, but perhaps events and stories closer to home for these first readers. I don't know how these first readers could have heard these words without becoming emotionally charged, much like many of us might be when we see and read afresh the events of September 11, 2001, and particularly those who may have directly lost a loved one at that time.

In Hebrews 11:33-40, we read a lengthy list of accomplishments and experiences that were achieved only **"by faith"** – only by means of a firm trust in the person, promises and provisions of God; a trust that most readily reveals itself in behavior consistent with the Word of God. The purpose of this list for both the first readers then as well as for us here this morning, is to inspire and motivate us to such expressions of faith – to ask of the LORD – "Lord, make my faith like the faith of these."

Now then, I am going to set up Hebrews 11:33-40 for us this morning, but we won't be able to look at all these accomplishments and experiences of faith for there are no less than twelve for us to consider. And of these twelve there seems to be a least three divisions that will serve as our outline for these verses. In Hebrews 11:33-34 I see that faith is prevailing; in verses 35-38 I see that faith is persevering; and finally in verses 39-40 I would have you see that faith is perfecting. Or to say it another way, in 33-34 we see the triumphs of faith; in 35-38 we see the trials of faith; and in 39-40 we see the thread of faith.

I. Faith is Prevailing (11:33-34)

32 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, 33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched

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the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

As we begin with our first point, that faith is prevailing, or that genuine saving faith triumphs, there is no doubt a connection between these triumphs and the persons mentioned in verse 32.

1. Faith Conquers

The first of seven triumphs or examples of faith as prevailing is that these **“conquered kingdoms” – “by faith.”** We noted last week that Gideon, Barak, Samson Jephthah, David, and even Samuel all defeated various kingdoms or rules through their faithful efforts. The word for **“conquered”** here is *agonizomai* in the Greek - from where we get our English word, “agonize.” The word means to fight fervently with, or to contend with. These, by faith, earnestly contended with, or agonized against overwhelming circumstances. Yet, by faith, not by might, not Gideon’s 300 men verses the Midianites 135,000, or David’s defeating of multiple superior armies, but by trusting in the word and direction of God these men fought and triumphed over their enemies.

As these first readers considered this, I cannot help but think they had a vivid personal experience with this idea of “agonizing” by faith. Remember that Nero had enacted a violent persecution against the Christians. But rather than annihilate and rather than squelching Christianity, the faith of Christ spread further and deeper throughout the Empire as Nero scattered the believers. The fact that there was this congregation of Hebrew Christians was a testimony that believers were “agonizing” – they were fighting fervently against earthly kingdoms; against the “rule or reign” of a man in order to follow after the rule or kingdom of God.

And so there is a direct application for us – for there are kingdoms to be conquered in our lives. But oftentimes the kingdoms, or rules or powers we face are not physical, but spiritual and personal. For example, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. Here we read of a war we are engaged in.

3 For though we walk in the flesh [in physical bodies, not according to the desires of the flesh], we do not war according to the flesh, 4 for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. 5 We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, 6 and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

One of the battles in which we must fight and agonize in is against the way the world thinks and acts both concerning itself and concerning God and the gospel. To take **“every thought captive”** speaks of destroying and conquering both human and satanic wisdom in order to free those captured by it from its soul-damning lies. I don’t know about you, but I know that I am not smart enough and certainly not clever enough to take on the world system by myself – but, I can do by faith. I trust in the person, promises, and provisions of God. While I can save no one, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for I believe it, not me, the message of

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Christ, not my cleverness of speech, is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. I am not called primarily to explain, but to proclaim the truth – and to know that it is the Spirit of God that opens the mind to understand that truth. Too often, we fear proclaiming the gospel because we are afraid that we will have to explain. To be sure, we are to be prepared to give a defense for what we believe, but do you believe that God, according to Colossians 1:13 is rescuing people from the dominion, from the kingdom of darkness and transferring them to the kingdom of His beloved Son? When we proclaim the gospel, by faith, believe that God is doing His work; I say to you that we, like Gideon, or David, are conquering kingdoms to the glory of God. Prevailing faith is a proclaiming faith; and a proclaiming faith conquers kingdoms.

2. Faith Competes

In addition to the truth that prevailing faith conquers, we read next in Hebrews 11:33 that prevailing faith **“performed acts of righteousness”** – in other words, faith competes – it competes against the forces of evil. The idea here is that in the face of evil, when given a choice between doing what is right or doing what was wrong; or to say it another way, of doing what was unpopular versus going along with the crowd, when the men of Hebrews 11:32 acted by faith, these “performed” – that is literally, they committed themselves to the task of administering righteousness. They did what was right, regardless of the consequences or ridicule they might face. Do you remember what Goliath said to David when David, this ruddy boy, came out to face the champion of Gath? We read what he said 1 Samuel 17:43-44 -

“Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? ...Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field.”

And when faced with this kind of antagonism, how did David respond? Did he respond in kind? Did he threaten Goliath by what he was going to do, or did he perform an act of righteousness and declare it was the power of God that would accomplish this miraculous feat – a young boy defeating the great giant of Gath? Listen to the words of David as I read them from 1 Samuel 17:45-47 -

45 Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. 46 This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, 47 and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD’S and He will give you into our hands.”

How is the believer to respond in the face of evil? Does he retaliate? Does he respond in kind? Does he bury his head in the sand and hope for the best? These first readers had seen evil in the person and persecution of Nero. How are they to respond? Turn with me if you would to 1 Peter 3. Let me remind you as we turn there that 1 Peter was written just about the time that Nero’s persecution first broke out. We read in 1 Peter 3:13-17 -

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13 Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. 17 For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

By faith, certainly not according to circumstances, but because these believed in the person, promises and provisions of God, were to “prove zealous for what is good” and even be prepared to “suffer for the sake [because they performed acts] of righteousness.” And what is the promise for doing this? You will be blessed! There is a blessing that comes for doing what is right, particularly when it is deemed unpopular or foolish. Beloved, one of the ways faith triumphs, that faith prevails is when God’s people do what is right in spite of all the evil around them, in spite of the temptations to do otherwise, in spite of what others might think. It is truly an act of faith for the believer not to take an improper advantage to get ahead at your place of employment even when it is encouraged; it is an act of faith when a believer refused to cheat on a test, even when many around you are doing so. It is always an act of faith to do what is right, to perform, or be committed to acts of righteousness when most others are either ambivalent or hostile to such acts. Oh let us pray that our faith would prevail over the pressures to do evil and that it would rather compete to perform acts of righteousness to the glory of God.

3. Faith obtains

So, we have seen that prevailing faith conquers kingdoms and it competes against evil. Now the third thing we see concerning prevailing faith is that it obtains. We read that **by faith** the people of God “**obtained promises.**” I suppose it would not take much to convince this group that the LORD is the God of promises. Throughout the Scriptures we see God making both near and far promises, those that will be experienced in this present life as well as those that will be experienced in the life to come. If we were to consider Abraham, we know that God promised to bless him both in his lifetime as well as beyond his own lifetime. In the life of believers, let us know that there are promises, mercies and graces to be experienced daily – For, “the Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is” the faithfulness of the LORD – His commitment to fulfill such daily promises.” But there are also promises reserved for the more distant future. When we speak of those who “obtained – or reached the goal of the promises of God” by faith, we are to be reminded that each fulfilled promise of God is simply a step toward a more precious fulfillment of an even greater promise. Listen to how Charles Spurgeon states it –

If we have had a little promise, and up till now have realized it, and made it the stay of our souls, surely God will give us a greater one, and so, from promise to promise speeding our

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way, we shall find the promises to be [the rungs] of the ladder which Jacob saw, the top whereof shall reach to heaven.

And just how are such promises obtained – again, it is only “by faith” We cannot reach heaven by a trust in ourselves or by something we have done, but rather only by a trust in God’s promises and provisions, realized in Christ. Every promise we see fulfilled now is drawing us closer to God. What a message for the persecuted congregation to whom this letter was written. Turn back to Hebrews 10:34-36. Here we see the author appealing to them, that they remember the promises of God for something better in the future. We read –

34 For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. 35 Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

These, many of whom may well have lost someone they loved to the persecution of Nero; or lost their own positions or possessions, needed reminding that they did so under the promise of God for something better. And what is better than possessions and positions in this life? The possession of heaven, of a future in glory as a child of God. The promise here is that God would deliver them safe to glory – that He who began the work of salvation would carry it on to completion until the time of Christ’s return.

How about you? Are you “by faith” – looking to and for the promises of God? Remember that according to Lamentations 3:22-23 such promises are new every morning. The promise of God’s presence (Hebrews 13:5); the promise of God provisions (Psalm 145:15-16). I could ask you to write down some of the promises of God you have obtained even today by considering them from His Word. But such promises are obtained only “by faith.” Let me close this morning (yes, I am not dealing with this last phrase “shut the mouths of lions” today as I think it goes better with the idea presented in verse 35) – so let me close with this picture of faith.

Being an amateur photographer there is a tool that I use often – that tool being a tripod. A tripod has three legs and without three legs it is rather unstable and useless. Might I suggest to you that true faith, the faith of those whom we have examined in Hebrews 11 has three legs, just like a tripod? True faith must know something (that is, has the facts); it must accept those facts as true; and it must then act on those facts. If anyone of these legs or facets is missing, then we don’t have a tripod, we don’t have faith, and what we do have is wobbly and destined to fall.

So then, true faith must know the promises of God; true faith must accept those promises as true; and true faith must act and rely on the promises of God. What are the promises of God? There are many, but let me key in on one of most important. Turn with me to Mark 1:15. Here we have the words with which Jesus began His ministry. I want you to see this - “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

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Now then, what is the promise to be obtained in this statement? Surely we can glean from this that God is in control, God rules all, God is coming, and that God is the judge – all this knowledge is necessary, but this not the promise – the promise is found in the word “repent” which means “to turn from sin and to turn to God.” And the promise is, that this is possible – because of Jesus paid for the wages of sin, those who believe that Jesus did this for them can turn from sin and self in order to love and serve the Savior. Now there are a lot of people who try to change their ways – some succeed and most seem to fail, but changing one’s ways and turning to God are not the same. We might turn ourselves from one immoral or disgusting habit to that which is more moral or less disgusting, but that is not turning to God; that is not trusting in God and His provision and so such is not faith. True faith understands that I must know God is holy; that I am a sinner and deserve nothing but death. True faith understands at some level the statement of Paul in Romans 7:24 who said,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Who can set a person free – no one but Jesus! And turning to Jesus brings us the promise of Jesus to forgive our sins, to grant us peace with God; to enable us to serve God and to secure for us everlasting life. This is the promise of the gospel. This promise can be obtained – only by faith. This is available forgiveness, peace, enablement and eternal life is nothing more than information to some people. To know this is not faith. The question now is, “do you accept it, and do you believe it to be true for you?” I hope you know these facts and accept them as true, but remember that to obtain the promises by faith, you must also act on this – and rely on it. Remember that true faith prevails and as we have considered this morning, true faith conquers kingdoms (rules and reigns) of the enemy. True faith competes against the ways of evil to perform acts of righteousness. And true faith obtains promises. Have you obtained the promise of eternal life; the promise of a regenerated, God-loving, Christ-exalting, Spirit-directed life? This is the great promise of God to those who believe. May we each be certain that we have obtained, reached out and hit the mark of the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ. For once you have been saved, you will know that faith prevails and you will long for this prevailing faith to be made more and more evident; that you might be assured of your salvation and that God might be more and more glorified.

Soli Deo Gloria

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