

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 8d)

Hebrews 11:32-40

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. 39 And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

One of the most basic, most fundamental words in our evangelical vocabulary is “faith.” If I were to ask you to recite for me some verses concerning faith, no doubt we would hear things like...

Hebrews 11:6, **“And without faith it is impossible to please God...”**

Romans 5:1, **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

Romans 1:17, **“For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”**

1 Peter 5:9, **“But resist him [the devil], firm in your faith...”**

1 Corinthians 16:13, **“Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”**

2 Corinthians 5:7, **“for we walk by faith, not by sight...”**

1 John 5:4, **“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith.”**

This list could go on, but suffice it to say that the most fundamental realities to genuine saving Christianity is faith. This has been our topic for several weeks now – the essence of saving faith. Over the past couple of weeks, here in Hebrews 11:33-34, we have seen the overall emphasis of prevailing faith. Remember that by prevailing faith, I speak of a faith that sees the mighty hand of God work miraculous things. We read of kingdoms being conquered,

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evil resisted by acts of righteousness, the obtaining of promises from God, the protective power of God manifested in diverse ways.

This morning, as we focus on Hebrews 11:35-38, our emphasis seems to move from the prevailing nature of faith, which has as its focus the work of God, to the persevering nature of faith, which has as its focus the divine enablement of the faithful to persevere, to stand firm, in spite of difficulties and trials. Saving faith is a persevering faith – it enables the believer to patiently endure; note I said patiently, not passively – for faith is active, always hopeful, always expecting, always, as we read in verses 33-34, prevailing.

Now I know that I have been to some painstakingly slow, overly meticulous in this study of faith. I don't want to lose sight of the forest for all the trees, but in our study of this forest of faith, to stay with the analogy, we have some impressive trees to examine; mighty oaks, towering redwoods and sweeping willows. So stay with me, and let us be blessed as we work through the greatness of this gift of faith.

So then, as we come to Hebrews 11:35-38, I would have you consider the truth that saving faith is persevering, that is, faith is active and is a continual force in the life of the believer. Before we look at this more closely, I would like to tell you why the truth that saving faith is persevering is such an important consideration.

There is a sad tendency of Christians to consider the "quality" of their faith in disproportion to the "object" of their faith. To put it in the form of an analogy – what is more important – the "quality" or "grade" of gas or a car? If you don't have a car, then it does not matter the quality of gas – is that not right? And if you have a car, while you may certainly desire to put the best gas in it possible, it will run on the lower grade – correct? Sometime we get too focused on the quality of our faith rather than looking to the object of our faith – that is God Himself. This is not to say we should not be concerned with the quality of our faith, for Jesus did rebuke the disciples for their "little faith." But as one theologian has put it, faith is "essentially extraspective" – meaning that faith does not primarily look into self, it is not principally concerned with being "introspective" but rather it looks out and up to the Lord Jesus Christ, constantly considering who He is, what He has done and how He, by His Spirit, works in and through the believer.

Faith then is "essentially extraspective" – looking first to Jesus and then continually looking on Jesus for encouragement, support, love, faithfulness, hope and empowerment to walk with Him. That familiar verse of Hebrews 12:2, referring to Jesus as what – "the author and perfecter of our faith" – calls us to be "fixing our eyes" on Him. That is first, that is essential. The Puritan John Rogers puts this "quality" verses "object" consideration of faith into perspective. He wrote:

"Weak faith is true faith - as precious, though not as great as strong faith: the same Holy Spirit the author, the same Gospel instrument... For it is not the strength of our faith that saves, but the truth of our faith - not the weakness of our faith that condemns, but the want - of faith."

My point with is simply this – as we have and continue to study here in Hebrews 11 the greatness of faith, it may be easy to become downcast, to say, my faith does not look like all these things described in this chapter. While it is good to consider the quality of your faith – we must do this – remember that it is the "object" of our faith – it is the Lord Jesus Christ in whom we must first believe and continually look to if we are ever to increase in the quality of our faith. Before you can grow in faith, you must be in right relationship with the giver of faith.

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And so, as we now look to this point of faith being persevering, of being an active and visible force in the life believer, let us also see then that this faith is only as such because Christ dwells in us. As we are taught in Galatians 2:20 - for we have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer we who live, but Christ lives in us – and the lives that we now live, we live how? By faith, believing that He is working in and through us – by faith in the Son of God.

So let us now consider Hebrews 11:35-38 and see how genuine faith is persevering be it weak or strong, authentic faith will be active and will manifest itself in some of the same ways as we see in these verses.

II. Faith is Persevering (Hebrews 11:35-38)

The persevering nature of faith is seen in that...

1. Faith is patient (35a)

“Women received back their dead by resurrection...”

The first description of persevering faith is found in the statement, **“Women received back their dead by resurrection...”** and from this we can note that faith is patient. Note that I said faith is patient, not that it is passive. One of the greatest hardships for a woman is the loss of loved one, particularly of a child. There is a deep pain associated with such a loss. But according to our verse and the testimony of Scripture, some of the women of faith had a spectacular experience as they received back their loved ones from the dead. Let us not forget the interim however, as they had to wait patiently for this to come about.

There are several examples of women receiving back their dead by resurrection. You might remember the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17, whose son was raised to life by Elijah’s stretching himself out over him three times. Elijah’s understudy, Elisha, did a similar feat in 2 Kings 4, raising from the death the son of a Shunammite woman, lying mouth to mouth, eye to eye and hand to hand.

No doubt, these Old Testament examples would have been in the minds of these readers. But there were even more contemporary examples. In Mark 5:35-42, Jesus raised the daughter of a synagogue official from the dead. And we are all familiar with the account of Lazarus in John 11, whom Jesus raised from the dead after four days. Additionally, Peter raised Tabitha in Acts 9, about 50 AD and it is recorded that Paul raised a boy by the name of Euthychus in Acts 20 around 60 AD, just a few years prior to the writing of this letter to the Hebrews. The point is, these would be familiar with the fact that women of faith had indeed received back their dead by resurrection. But again, we are left with an interesting question; for no doubt there were faithful women in this Hebrew congregation who had lost child or husband in the great persecution of Nero. How were these, by faith, to receive back their dead by resurrection?

To answer that question I think we need to turn back to John 11 and the account of the raising of Lazarus. You might recall the sorrow that both Mary and Martha had at the loss of their brother. Perhaps there was even a seeming hint of impatience when in John 11:21 Martha says to Jesus, **“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”** For four days Martha waited for Jesus and I would have you note what she said in 11:22 – **“Even now I know [I believe, I have faith] that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.”** Then, Jesus makes a definitive statement in verse 23, **“Your brother will rise again.”** Martha affirms this, in essence stating her patient faith – is it not a patient faith that says, according to verse 24, **“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”** In other

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words, she has faith that she will receive back her dead by resurrection – by faith she believe that the death of Lazarus is not the end of Lazarus, that while she has been parted from him at the present, she will by faith patiently await for that day when she will see him again. She expresses a patient faith – a faith that firmly trusts in the person, promises and provisions of God.

Beloved, the story could end right here and be a valuable lesson. However we know that this was not the end of the story as Jesus uses the death of Lazarus to point Martha to Him as the object of her faith, saying to her in verses 25-26, **“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”** Now remember, at this point there is no hint that Jesus intends to raise Lazarus from the dead, which makes Jesus question at the end of verse 26 important when He asked, **“Do you believe this?”** In other words, to you believe in who I am, what I have said and what I promise to do? Do you believe that I am the object of faith, that I alone have the power of life, the power of resurrection, that I alone can give you back your dead?

By the way, this ultimately is the question that each of us must answer? Do you really believe that Jesus is life, life to live for God, life from the death; life as a gift from God to those who believe as opposed to receiving the wages of your sin, which is death, eternal separation from God? Do you believe this? Do you believe the words of Christ? Do you believe that He means you when He says, “Follow Me?” Do you believe that He speaks to you when He says, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me.”? Do you believe the words of Jesus as recorded in John 5:24 when He says, **“Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes in Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”**? Who is the one who has this eternal life? The one who hears and believes, that is understands and acts upon the truth of God. Such a one is a person of faith, a faith that patiently waits for the fullness of eternal life to come at the resurrection.

Martha’s response in verse 27 was in depth as she said, **“Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”** It is not so much that she had faith in resurrection, for she does not mention that here. Rather she confessed faith in Jesus and was content, that is patient - to trust Him to do what was right regarding her brother Lazarus. The faith of Martha was persevering, it would endure, it would manifest itself by staying true regardless of the circumstances. It was, like the women of Hebrews 11:35, a patient and therefore persevering faith, looking unto Jesus alone for hope and eternal life.

2. [Persevering] Faith is liberating (Hebrews 11:35b)

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

In addition to persevering faith being patient, the rest of Hebrews 11:35 reveals to us that faith is also liberating. We read, **“and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection.”** When true faith has as its object Jesus Christ and all His promises, then regardless of how tight or binding the circumstances seem, there is a freedom to live for and love Jesus boldly. Our text indicates that there were others, that is others of faith, who trusted the Lord every bit as much as the those we have already considered, who, although they were **“tortured”** – a word which speaks of being stretched out on a drum or rack and beat to death, that those who were put into such life

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threatening situations, called upon to recant their faith, to deny their trust in Jesus Christ, that even these, in the midst of such an event, were **“not accepting their release”** – which, if might put in a crude way, is a way of saying that these believers were stubborn in their faith – that they would not deny their faith in God, even if that was the only way to be released from the rack. They were not about to renounce God.

Now the use of this word “tortured” is interesting and may point us to what the author had in mind. The Greek word is “tympanum” – you have heard of tympani drums, those big, kettle-like drums used in orchestras – they get their names from these large drums or wheels upon which Jews were stretched out upon in order to be beaten or dismembered during a time called the Maccabean persecution, around 167 BC. In the extra-biblical book of 2 Maccabees is an gruesome account of the torture of a ninety-year-old priest named Eleazar, who refused to eat swine’s flesh (6:18-31) and then the text goes on to record even more revolting accounts of the systematic torture of the Jews for the same reason.

In the accounts, these people could have been released if they had but recanted their faith. But the author of Hebrews, seeing these as people of faith, a faith in which they persevered; a faith in which while bound, they considered themselves liberated, free to serve God according to His word and promises. Why? Because according to Hebrews 11:35, these did not recant, **“so that they might obtain a better resurrection.”** This seems strange – does it not? What makes one resurrection better than another? We must see this in its context. It is a comparative statement with the first part of verse 35, “Women received back their dead by resurrection...” The resurrection referred to in at the beginning of the verse is simply a resurrection back to life on this earth, for a limited time, in an unglorified body. Remember that Lazarus was wondrously and gloriously raised from the dead only to die once again. But what is meant here at the end of verse 35 is truly a resurrection to everlasting life in the world to come.

What is it that would make a person willing to die to this life because he knows that there is a better life, a preferred life? We call it “faith” – we trust in the promise of God that there is more to this life, there is an eternal life for which we both patiently await and which liberates us from being bound or tie to this world so much that we would fear leaving it.

I believe that what we see here is nothing short of what we see in the life of the Apostle Paul. Turn with me to those familiar words of Philippians 1:21-24. Remember that Paul is in prison. He does not know his fate. He could be tortured for his faith. He could die. But what does he say beginning in verse 21?

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

To Paul there was nothing more satisfying than the thought of being release from this life to live in the fullness of life in the presence of God and yet nothing more honorable to him that to remain in this life and be used to encourage other believers. Is this how you see your life? By faith, to you regard being the presence of the Lord as your greatest desire and yet, even if you should suffer in this life, does the promise of that presence motivate you, liberate you to press on and encourage others in the faith?

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We catch yet another glimpse of this liberating faith of Paul over in chapter 4 – turn there – and let us read beginning in verse 11;

11 Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

In other words, “I may have an abundance, or everything earthly may be loss, but I am always, be I free or in bonds, at liberty to do all things Christ.” Do you believe this? Do you believe that your circumstances, be they good or bad; in health or illness, with abundance or in poverty are never the determining factor to your obedience in Christ? To say it more simply, do you believe that circumstances are not to determine obedience to Christ? Do you believe that by faith, that whatever God brings to pass in your life, you can do all things through Him who alone strengthens you [that is He alone is the object of your faith]? In Christ, by faith in Christ, you are absolutely free to serve Him anytime, anywhere; that is all the time and everywhere!

So then, how do you know if your faith is persevering? This morning we have seen at least two ways. First, is your faith patient, trusting in the good word of the Lord, expecting Him to bring to pass all that He has promised, particularly the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ? Second, is your faith liberating, causing you to serve Jesus regardless of circumstances; refusing to say that you are too young, or too old, that you are in a special season of life, that you have served your time, or that you do not have enough experience. Maybe your faith will bring you to a place of torture; maybe your faith will exceedingly try your patience, but may we all desire to have the attitude of Christ, who for the joy set before Him, endure the cross (torture), despising the shame (patience), and has, because of His obedience, sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. We are called to be obedient by faith. May our faith persevere. May our faith manifest patience. May our faith liberate us to greater service and devotion to Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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