
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 8e)

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.

As long as we have been in Hebrews 11 and learning faith, some might think that we have exhausted subject. What more could be said about faith that has not yet been covered? In just the past couple of weeks, beginning in verse 32, we have seen the prevailing nature of faith; that faith conquers, it competes against evil, it obtains promises from God; it protects the soul, quenches the fires of wrath; delivers from the judgment of the sword and strengthens the weak, enabling them to do great things for God. Additionally, faith also perseveres and beginning in verse 35 we saw the first of two aspect of persevering faith, namely that faith is patient, allowing the believer to remain true in spite of circumstances and that faith is liberating, allowing the believer to be bold and give all his life to serving God, even if it means hardship or death.

This morning, in Hebrews 11:36-38, we again pick up this idea of persevering faith – that is the divine enablement of the faithful to persevere, to stand firm, in spite of difficulties and trials. As I just said, we have seen two characteristics of this persevering faith from verse 35, that faith is patient and faith is liberating. And while there are a number of things listed in verses 36-38, I think we can safely sum these up in just two more characteristics and so these will serve as our points this morning; namely that persevering faith is also *enduring* and that persevering faith is *empowering*.

Now before we look specifically at this first point, let me set the emotional stage. Several years back we took a group of graduating seniors to Six Flags Over Texas in Arlington. Of course one of the main and great attractions is their giant roller coaster called “The Titan.” Most of the youth had never been on “The Titan” and so there were quite a few questions about it. As we stood in line, I explained that we would be hiked up some 255 feet to make a nearly vertical drop, racing into an underground shed at a speed of about 85 miles per hour and then race around the track into a helix before coming to a grinding halt. Now, I remember at least one in our party that was just a bit more than anxious about this. In line, he

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was quiet and reflective. Occasionally he would joke about this or that, but eventually was the moment of truth. We boarded the coaster and took off onto our new and previously un-experienced adventure. And, I remember quite well when we got off the train and met up with our group at the exit gate: this one young man, whose hair was normally a bit long and curly was pushed strait back; and his skin, which was fair to begin with, was now white; and his hand were clenched with his arms trembling. I asked him, “What did you think?” To which he responded something along the lines of “that was incredible!” I asked him if he wanted to ride it again to which he quickly responded, “no, at least not right now.”

I share this story because many of us can relate to waiting to do something or for something to happen of which we have never before experienced. Sometimes that something may be as entertaining as a roller coaster, but it might also be something more extreme. But whatever it is, don't we like to talk it over with someone who has been there, who has gone through the experience before. We would like to know if we are really going to be able to make it. In the case of the youth and the roller coaster, it was an issue of, “will I scream like a girl” or “will I lose my lunch” or “will I embarrass myself.”

But I have found that our experiences as believers can sometimes bring us to similar feelings. We get challenged or convicted by reading the Word, or hearing a sermon, or exhorted by a friend to trust God more and we wonder, “will I be able to do that” or “will I make it through.” As we come to Hebrews 11:36-38 there is a bit of a change from the previous verses. Up till now, I have been saying that many of the things expressed in verses 33-34 have some clear spiritual applications to us. By faith, we do conquer kingdoms, for as we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are transferred, according to Colossians 1:13, from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son. We know that by faith, we are to perform works of righteousness in a crooked and depraved world, for even James has noted that **“faith without works is dead”** – that genuine saving faith works. So, we can simply examine our lives and see if we have a working faith, a conquering faith, a faith that obtains the promises of God and so forth. But as we come to verses 36-38, we see things about faith that we may or may not necessarily experience and there is no “spiritualizing” them. As we continue them to see the preserving nature of faith in these verses, let us note first all that such faith is enduring.

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

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

3. Faith is enduring (11:36)

and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

As I said, is it not true that generally speaking, we like to know what we can expect of ourselves in any given situation? And as the writer of this letter addresses this Hebrew congregation, he seems to speak now to a question that his readers, as well as us, need to have answered. If we, as professors of faith in Jesus Christ, ever were to come face to face with hardcore, intense persecution, would we pass the test of faith? In other words, how can we *know* that our faith is real if we don't know how we might personally do in light of persecution? Have you ever wondered that? Have you ever wondered how you would do if your faith was challenged by the barrel of a gun, if you would pass the test? Any seriously thinking professor of faith has and I believe that we have some encouragement in this text

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before us. Let me expound on this verse a bit and then let us consider how we might find encouragement from it.

To begin with, note that our text begins with the words, “**and others...**” The Greek for “**others**” here indicates that this is an entirely different group of people being spoken of in the text. We are no longer considering David or Gideon or Samuel. We are not even speaking of women who have received back their dead by resurrection. This is an unnamed number of *faithful* saints, who, by the power of God, endured extraordinary things. Verse 36 goes on to say that these “**others experienced...**” The English word “**experienced**” here, while certainly carrying part of the idea of the original Greek, is also incomplete. The Greek verb speaks of either receiving (a passive act) or of taking to oneself (an active act). Here in verse 36 it is in the active voice, that these **others** took something to themselves. What happened to them was not by accident; they were not just waiting around somewhere and these things blindsided them. No, when they were faced with what is revealed in this verse, they “**by faith**” took it to themselves because they knew that whatever the outcome, they would be saved and God would be glorified. And, as you can see here, there are four things these “others” took to themselves.

First, they took to themselves “**mockings.**” These “**mockings**” are simply cruel verbal abuses. The purpose of such verbal abuses is to ridicule, dishonor and literally shame a person for their beliefs or practices. I know that my illustration is a bit antiquated, but just some 20 years or so ago, to be publicly identified as a homosexual and all the colorful adjectives that go with it, would have been to most humiliating? By and large, most people used to mock such a person. Today of course, many wear that title as if it were a badge of honor.

Let us not forget that the term “Christian” was not originally used as a term of honor either. It was meant to disgrace a seemingly fringe group of people who worshipped only one God and some thought they were cannibals as they ate the flesh of their master.

The point to be made here is that those of faith were able to take to themselves the mockings, the ridicule, the scorn of whatever people had to say about them, so long as what they said was because of their faith in Christ. They were not ashamed to be called “Christians”; they found no dishonor in being referred to as those who believed only in one God. Again, we see this mocking attitude being referred to by Peter in 1 Peter 4:14-16.

14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

In other words, call me what you will, so long as what you say is true with who Jesus is and the word of God, you can deride me with such truth all day long.

But in addition to these mockings, our text says that these also took to themselves “**scourgings.**” The word here for “scourging” is the Greek word “mastix” – which some of you may be familiar with. A “mastix” is a Roman flagellum, a whip, comprised of a short handle and several leather cords to which were affixed jagged pieces of bone, metal and even shards of glass. Some think that that author of Hebrews may have been referring again to the inter-

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testamental era, that time between the Old and New Testaments, called the Maccabean period around 167 BC. During this time, a powerful and cruel king who sat in Syria, just north of Israel, named Antiochus Epiphanes, forced the Jews to eat the flesh of swine by “scourging” them with “masts”. Generally the victim of such a scourging was tied to a post and blows were applied to the back and loins. As the leather wrapped around the victim’s back, the executioner would then proceed to pull those jagged bones and shards to tear into and tear off pieces of flesh. It is said that if the executioner was particularly cruel, he would turn the victim to face him and would tear into his stomach and bowels. So horrific was this process that a great majority of them would faint and many were simply killed, which is interesting considering that scourging was generally used as a prelude to the capital punishment of crucifixion. Scourging was considered “merciful” as it so weakened the victim that his experience on the cross would be shortened. Of course, we know that this scourging was done to our Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 27:46. So, we are told that “by faith” these “others” took upon themselves such “**scourgings**.”

Added to these “**mockings**” and “**scourgings**” and building to a climax, were “**chains**” – a reference to “shackles” – being bound hand and foot; along with “**imprisonment**” – a reference to being caged or confined. In other words, “by faith” these “**others**” lost all earthly freedoms.

Now, what is the point? Remember that we do like to know what to expect, do we not? Perhaps what is being addressed here is a fear, a concern. How can we know if we will endure these things “by faith?” How can I know if I will stay true to the Lord in such trials or if I will deny Him? Beloved, here is the great encouragement. For if your faith has been manifesting the other characteristics of the previous verses; if you have seen the dominion of darkness conquered as you have been transferred to the kingdom of God’s Son, if your faith works as you perform works of righteousness; if you are obtaining the promises of God and the like, then you may expect that if you are called upon to suffer mockings, scourging, chains and imprisonment – you will endure, because endurance is a fruit of faith. In other words, if you will invest yourself in seeing faith expressed as previously in this chapter, then, like these others, you will be able to actively receive, take upon yourself any verbal abuse, any physical abuse; any instruments of restricting your earthly freedom “by faith.”

It is not that these were going out with the purpose of being verbally and physically abused. Rather, if and when such persecution reveals itself, when it happens, the faithful will simply realize the enduring nature of faith. This principle of simply trusting in the person, promises and provisions of God, by faith, in times of persecution, is seen the words of Christ over in Luke 12:11-12 –

11 When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

This is the promise of God, that those of faith will endure through even the most horrific of circumstances. So, do not worry, but simply devote yourself to God.

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4. Faith is Empowering (Hebrews 11:37-38)

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.

So, persevering faith is enduring, but finally, as seen now in verses 37-38, persevering faith is empowering. Let me quickly walk you through the five areas mentioned in which the faithful were empowered. Empowered to what, you ask? They were empowered to continue to testify of their faith in God regardless of the cost.

First, we are told that they were stoned. While stoning was a common Jewish practice of judgment some of the readers may well have had in mind persons like Peter and John who reported in Acts 5 who they were almost stoned for their faith and yet, even in light of such a threat, Acts 5:29-32 records the testimony of Peter, who when commanded not to speak about Jesus any longer said, “We must obey God rather than men” and then he proceeded to share the message of the saving work of Christ. And perhaps one of the greatest accounts is that of Paul in Acts 14, who after being run out of Antioch and Iconium, went to the city of Lystra. When the Jews of Antioch and Iconium heard this, they went to Lystra, dragged him out of the city and stoned him, they thought to death. But according to Acts 14:21-22, he got up, went back to Lystra and the next day traveled to Derbe where he preached the gospel and then went back through Lystra, Antioch and Iconium. Paul was empowered to continue to preach the gospel in spite of the persecution.

The second description was that the faithful were “sawn in two.” The Greek here is insightful as it literally means “to be sawn in two.” It appears that the author may have been referring here to Jewish tradition that taught that the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two by King Manasseh. But what is intriguing is what is said of Isaiah in the extra-biblical book *The Ascension of Isaiah*, that he “neither cried aloud or wept, but his lips spake with the Holy Spirit until he was sawn in twain.” The point, there was a testimony given. Isaiah was empowered to trust and testify of the Lord in this most trying of circumstances.

The third description was that **“they were tempted.”** The idea here is a fiendish torture, not of the body, but of the conscience where the torturer would promise release if the victim would recant. By faith even under such pressures, these would not recant their trust in God.

The fourth description is that **“they were put to death with the sword.”** This is of course in contrast to verse 34 where some by faith escaped the edge of the sword. But these, by faith, were judged by the world as evil and gave their lives as examples of trust in the Lord.

The fifth description is found in the statement, **“they went about...”** For the rest of verse 37 and 38 is simply an explanation of how the faithful “went about...” They did so **“in sheepskins, in goatskins [manner of dress], being destitute [without resources], afflicted [hard-pressed or hounded by their enemies], and ill-treated [literally tormented, mistreated].”** Additionally, moving past the parenthetical statement that starts verse 38, these also **“went about...wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.”** The point is that “by faith” these were empowered to have and maintain a testimony of faith even as they were deprived of all ordinary humanitarian expectations. I don’t think we

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can hardly imagine the extent of deprivation multitudes of the faithful have endured for the cause of Christ. So much for the prosperity gospel preached today! But occasionally we will stop and ask ourselves, “Could I do that?” Sometimes we might even consider that question with fear and trepidation asking if our faith is strong enough, is our faith that genuine as to be able to endure such trials? Can we know if our faith is so empowered?

Beloved, again, I submit to you that to the extent that you see your faith maturing in those characteristics and areas which can be manifested or known now, you can be assured, you can expect that your faith will carry you through the most trying of circumstances. For the final statement we will consider here is found at the front end of verse 38, the testimony of the word of God concerning such persons as these, “**(men of whom the world was not worthy)**”. The “**world**” here speaks of an attitude of materialism and sensuality, a world that wants; wants to have, to hold, to see with physical eyes as opposed to those who walk by faith. Such a world does not understand the life of faith. As one preacher as put it, “*the world drove them out thinking them to be unworthy to live in it, while in truth [the world] was unworthy to have them living in it.*” How is that for a testimony?

So then, genuine, persevering faith is promised to endure as well as to empower for continued testimony regardless of the trials and circumstances. We sing a hymn sometimes that always overwhelms me because it seems to speak of so many things that we really don’t experience as believers today – at least not yet. As I think about the text of this hymn, I often find myself asking, “Could I really mean this? Is my faith this genuine?” And as I have said before, the great encouragement is this, if you are seeing your faith mature, if you are seeing your desire to know, love and serve God grow, if you are seeing sin more and more defeated in your life, if you see a growing desire to tell others about Christ, then these are signs to you that whatever may come, your faith will endure and you will be empowered by faith to glorify God in any and all circumstances. Then you can know that you too can, in the words of verse 36, take to yourselves all that other saints have experienced as well as all that this hymn speaks of. Let me read you this text and then we will close by singing it together.

Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee.
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shall be.
Perish every fond ambition, all I’ve sought or hoped or known.
Yet how rich is my condition! God and Heaven are still mine own.

Let the world despise and leave me, they have left my Savior, too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue.
And while Thou shalt smile upon me, God of wisdom, love and might,
Foes may hate and friends disown me, show Thy face and all is bright.

Go, then, earthly fame and treasure! Come, disaster, scorn and pain!
In Thy service, pain is pleasure; with Thy favor, loss is gain.
I have called Thee, “Abba, Father”; I have set my heart on Thee:
Storms may howl, and clouds may gather, all must work for good to me.

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Man may trouble and distress me, 'twill but drive me to Thy breast.
Life with trials hard may press me; heaven will bring me sweeter rest.
Oh, 'tis not in grief to harm me while Thy love is left to me;
Oh, 'twere not in joy to charm me, were that joy unmixed with Thee.

Take, my soul, thy full salvation; rise o'er sin, and fear, and care;
Joy to find in every station something still to do or bear:
Think what Spirit dwells within thee; what a Father's smile is thine;
What a Savior died to win thee, child of heaven, shouldst thou repine?

Haste then on from grace to glory, armed by faith, and winged by prayer,
Heaven's eternal day's before thee, God's own hand shall guide thee there.
Soon shall close thy earthly mission, swift shall pass thy pilgrim days;
Hope soon change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise.

Text: Henry F. Lyte, 1824

Soli Deo Gloria

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