

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

The Characters of Faith – Hebrews 11:39-40 (Part 8f)

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.

I begin this morning with a list, a list of names that some of you will quickly identify and others will struggle with. I have mixed the names up in this list, starting with those I think fewer people would know and working up to names at least a great majority of you might know. Here is the list, given with this question, what do these men have in common?

Dan Brouthers, Billy Hamilton, Tris Speaker, Joe Jackson, Ed Delahanty, Lefty O'Doul, Rogers Hornsby, Ted Williams, Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth.

Now, some of you might be tempted to say simply, "They are all baseball players" – which is true. Some of you might have guessed that all are Hall of Famers, or even that the list I just gave you represents the men who have the top ten all time batting averages for major league baseball. And while all that is true. I find it interesting that men such as this are immortalized for doing something that all other sports would find repulsive – you know what that is? A baseball batter is the only sports figure that can be counted successful and a hero even when he fails on average more than 2/3rds of the time. Can you imagine any other job that would settle for such imperfection? I mean even the worst Hall of Fame football quarterback, George Blanda, completed 48% of his passes, something that would not be tolerated from most quarterbacks today. But can you imagine being honored for such incompleteness, such imperfection? How long would a surgeon keep his license if he consistently lost 2/3rds of his patients; or a banker lost 2/3rds of the money? How long would our brother Tyler last as a painter if he consistently only painted 1/3rd to 1/2 of a wall? Not very long. And yet we praise these sports figures, particularly baseball batters, who consistently fail at what they do and who are grossly imperfect in their endeavors, no matter how entertaining it might be.

As we come now to the close of Hebrews 11 and look specifically at verses 39-40, let us note carefully the closing words, **"so that apart from us they would not be made perfect."** This statement serves as the basis of our premise this morning, namely that true, biblical faith

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

is perfecting. Faith has a goal and end that has been appointed by God and that is the ultimate and absolute perfection of all those who live by faith.

Now, I don't have a "perfect" outline this morning. Let me just share with you some thoughts as we consider Hebrews 11:39-40 phrase by phrase. Our text begins with, "**And all these...**" Here we have a call to reflect back upon the great examples and expressions of faith as revealed in the previous verses. Pause and consider the faith of Enoch and the prophets, of Abraham and Moses, of Israel as well as a whole host of nameless faithful. These lived by faith and these died by faith. But what all these had in common was that because of their faith, because of their firm trust in the person, promises and provisions of God, a trust that affected their behavior, causing them to live according to God's word, "**all these**" were those who had "**gained approval through their faith.**" I love this statement. Beloved this is the goal of faith, to gain the approval, or to take from the marginal reading of the NASB, to have obtained a testimony. Just like Able and Enoch back in Hebrews 11:4-5, all these received the approving testimony of God that their faith was true and these pleased God. For the goal of faith is found back there in Hebrews 11:6 –

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

All these received the testimony that they had pleased God and all these, by faith, had obtained promises from God. This reminds us then that the ultimate goal of faith is to live a life pleasing to God.

But then our text goes on to tell us something somewhat shocking; that these, "**did not receive what was promised...**" It is important to read this verse correctly, for God had indeed made many promises to the likes of Able, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and the rest, many promises that came to pass, that strengthened their faith and encouraged their souls. Hebrews 11:39 is quite specific however. It literally reads here at the end that these "**did not receive the promise...**" In all the promises of God, there was one promise made over and over, from generation to generation, from age to age that was not fulfilled in the lifetimes of any of these mentioned in Hebrews 11. It was certainly something that all of these looked forward to and anticipated with all certainty, but what was that one promise they did not obtain, that they did not live to see? Truly that promise to which all other promises were subjected to was the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of God. They were longing and waiting to see the promised coming of Jesus. Such a truth was summed up well in the song that we sang earlier:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

Let us consider just a few of the many references in the Old Testament that served as the moorings of the faith of those who believed God promised salvation, deliverance from sin through Messiah. From the first mention of a promised deliverer in Genesis 3:15 –

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.”

To the prophecy and promise of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 of another and greater prophet to come like himself –

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.

To the promise of one who will deliver God’s people and lead them like a Shepherd in Ezekiel 34:23 –

Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd.

With these and many other promises, the Old Testament faithful looked forward to and anticipated the fulfillment of the time when the Messiah would come and speak to them the words of God and shepherd them out of bondage, not just physically but most importantly spiritually. For the promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 would truly be their hope –

31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. 33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Beloved, this was the promise, a Messiah who would accomplish these things, yet each one, from Able to the unnamed faithful of the previous verses who lived in the Old Testament, “died in faith” – that is they died in joyful anticipation that while they did not yet see Messiah, they surely would one day.

Before we move on, let me make this application – while we know and will come to see shortly that what was largely in view here was the first coming of Christ to provide Himself as the sole and final sacrifice for man’s sin, something that we look back to, we also yet have the fullness of the promise to be obtained on our part, knowing that Jesus did not come simply to be a sacrifice for sin, but also to then make His followers fit for heaven, and just like the Old Testament saints looked forward by faith to the provision of Messiah for salvation from sin; we today by faith look forward to the final realization of that provision, that day when we shall be fully conformed to the image of Christ, dressed in His righteousness alone and therefore able

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

to stand before God's throne. In other words, do we, by faith, look expectantly and longingly for His coming? And just how does this faith reveal itself. Consider the words of 1 John 2:28 –

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.

Hebrews 11:40

Ok, so we have seen from verse 39 that it is only by faith that anyone pleases God and gains His approval, obtaining a testimony, a good report of that faith from God, and now, in verse 40, we have this somewhat shocking statement that the Old Testament saints were imperfect, incomplete, not receiving as of their lifetimes that which was promised. This leads us to a question. Why? Why is it that God left them in this state of imperfection and incompleteness? May I submit to you that the reason for this was to reveal to both to Old Testament saints and to New Testament saints, the surpassing greatness of the person and sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. Hebrews 11:40 reads, ***“because God had provided something better for us...”*** In the Old Testament, the saints were to understand and anticipate something better to come than the sacrifice of bulls and goats, that these simply served as a type, a picture of the perfection to come with Messiah. This thought is summed up in Hebrews 10:1 -

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near.

Because of this, the Old Testament saints were to long for perfection by the coming of something or Someone greater than what had been given. But the New Testament saints have something better – they have the contrast between the Old and New and can understand by comparison, how much greater is Christ than all the types and symbols. We see this summed up for us in Hebrews 10:14 –

For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

The point being made here is to point us to Jesus, to have our attention affixed to Jesus. Even as the Old Testament saints prevailed and persevered through time and trials by faith in the coming promise of God to send Messiah, so too are New Testament saints, folks like you and me, to prevail and persevere through times and trials by remembering what Jesus has done for us. As they looked forward, we look back and recall that Jesus died on the cross to “save” us – not to harm us; not to torment us – but to give us life and hope. And then, because we have been blessed to see this first coming of Messiah as the author of our faith, we exercise a similar faith to that of Abraham and the other Old Testament saints by looking forward to Jesus coming again “the perfecter” of our faith.

Again, verse 40 tells us that ***“God had provided”*** that is – He has “furnished in advanced”; “planned beforehand” – ***“something better for us.”*** While this “something better” includes much of what we have just spoken about, I think it safe to say that this phrase serves as a summary of all the teaching of this letter to the Hebrews from 1:1-10:18. The theme of the book is the superiority of Christ. There is something better for us who live in the time since the

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

first coming of Christ. Just what are those “better” things? We have seen at least three already from the book of Hebrews:

First, New Testament saints have a better revelation; a better revelation in the person and words of Jesus Christ. Remember Hebrews 1:1-2 –

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Second, and we have alluded to this already, New Testament saints have the enjoyment of many of the New Covenant blessings. We read already Jeremiah 31:31-34, but we see the author of Hebrews quote this passage in 8:7-13. And while there are promises there clearly intended for a restored future ethnic Israel, the spiritual promises of an inward and personal knowledge of God along with the forgiveness of sin has been inaugurated by Christ for all who believe on Him.

Third and finally, that which New Testament saints have that the Old Testament saints did not, is the conscience clearing blessing of knowing that Jesus has provided the final and perfect sacrifice for sin. Let us look back to Hebrews 9:11-14, 28 –

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? ... 28 so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.

One of the things that make God’s plan for New Testament saints “better” is that rather than living in anticipation of needing to have their consciences cleansed from sin as did the Old Testament saint, is that the New Testament saint lives in anticipation of His second coming **“for salvation without reference to sin”** – (inaugurated – not consummated) Does this describe your faith? A faith that has experienced cleansing from sin by trusting that Jesus did indeed come and die on the cross for your sins, a cleansing that now motivates you to follow Christ and a faith that then longs for His return?

This brings us then to that phrase with which we started, **“so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.”** Remember that the “us” refers to New Testament saints and the “they” refers to Old Testament saints. It might be tempting to read this and think in terms that somehow the faith of New Testament saints is better than that of Old Testament ones. However, if you read it carefully, the verse clearly indicates that the faith of both Old and New Testament saints is dependent upon one another. Not only is the Old Testament saint incomplete and imperfect without the very times and experiences of the New Testament saints, but the New Testament saints, that is, our faith is incomplete and imperfect without the times and experiences of the Old Testament saints. There are not “two faiths” or “two ways of salvation” – only one, faith in Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Whereas “they”

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

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

looked for Christ in the shadows of the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices, we see Christ in all His fullness and sufficiency upon the cross. Whereas they looked forward to the coming of Christ, anticipating how He would bring salvation to pass, we look back into the Old Testament and see Christ working out this plan of salvation.

And if anyone thinks that New Testament faith is somehow better than Old Testament faith based on this verse, all we have to do is read the next verse, Hebrews 12:1 which says –

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us..

The key point of this statement is simply that the experience of faith of the Old Testament saints testifies to us of the importance of prevailing, persevering and perfecting faith. In other words, these OT saints have shown us what pleases God, and we could not be perfect if we did not know what pleases God, and we then testify to the authentic nature of their faith, perfecting their faith as it were, by continuing to trust in the person, promises and provisions of God even as they trusted in Him. Both Old and New Testament saints share the same faith and the goal of faith is clear, perfection, to perfectly please God and to perfectly be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

So, while we may continue to cheer on sports heroes who are imperfect and fail more than 2/3rds of the time, understand that God does not intend, nor will He allow imperfection in His own. The Lord intends your faith to be perfect, looking back to the Old Testament to see the glory of His coming to be the once for all sacrifice for sin to those who believe, as well as looking forward, eagerly waiting for Him to return. How do you know if your faith is perfect or being perfected? Are you looking back to see what Jesus has done and looking forward to what Jesus has promised? Do these things affect your life, even down to the details? Let me close with a couple of questions John Calvin posed with regard to Hebrews 11:39-40. He asked...

1. “If those on whom the great light of grace had not yet shone showed such surpassing constancy in bearing their ills, what effect ought the full glory of the gospel have on us?”
2. “A tiny spark of light led them to heaven but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us, what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?”

What things of this earth captive and occupy you more than a commitment and devotion to Christ? May we be continually and utterly changed by the message of the gospel and, as Paul, ***“count all things loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...”*** (Philippians 3:8). Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2007 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, 2300 South 13th Street Rogers, AR 72758.

*The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ
Hebrews 11:32-40 – The Characters of Faith (Part 8f)
September 23, 2007*