

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above all Things
Men and Women of Whom the World Was Not Worthy
Hebrews 11:29-38

Text:

Hebrews 11:29-38 (ESV)

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. [Lit. “But others”] Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Introduction:

As we have worked our way through the “faith” chapter, we have seen some pretty clear realities as to the nature of faith.

One of the most important principles I have learned about faith – that I didn’t see as clearly before I studied this chapter – is that faith is a response to God. Remember that I have stated now several times that God is always prior to faith. God precedes faith. First comes God with His revelation about himself, or a Word, or a command, or a promise – and even with all of them wrapped up in one as He comes to us in a person – the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, as we see that person, hear that word, meditate on that promise, or contemplate the command, we are moved to respond. Faith is the response of active obedience to the word of God as it lays hold on the promises from God. Unbelief, is the response of disobedience because it cannot find God trustworthy or reliable.

Well, as we compare this one aspect of faith – and it is not the only aspect of faith – with our Christian culture’s use of the word faith, we will find some amazingly clear help in cleaning up our dictionary. Truth be told – evangelicals abuse the word faith and make it mean everything it is not.

There are two very loud voices today that misuse and abuse the nature of faith. The one which I have been exposing throughout the chapter is the health, wealth and prosperity preachers. These men and women talk of faith as if it is God who responds to your faith. If you can muster up enough faith to believe that all things are possible then God will respond to your faith and give you wealth; God will respond and heal your disease; God will make you prosper. But it is clearly God who responds to you. This is the exact opposite of what I find to be the nature of faith in Hebrews 11. This kind of teaching makes you always prior to God so that God responds to you.

But before we get too smug and shame them mercilessly, we should examine much of the preaching of our own heritage as Baptists. I know for a fact that the vast majority of my audience here today has

fallen prey to the kind of preaching that produces a kind of mindset that Jerry Bridges calls a “good-day-bad-day” syndrome. Let me recite some popular quotes from bad and unbalanced sermons:

- “God works through clean vessels.” (We know we are “unclean”)
- “The blessings of God come to me as I obey his commands.” (We hear “only” by obedience)
- “Obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings cursing.” (to the justified; cf. Rom 8.1)
- “Although we are saved, we forfeit God’s blessings in our daily lives by our performance.”
- God’s blessings depend on our performance.

These sound good; but in order to be faithful to the whole teaching of Scripture, you would need several caveats and lots of limitations on your words to make them true.

But what’s my point? To say that God responds to my performance – that God is obligated to bless me on my spiritually good days, but not on my spiritually bad days is the same wrong-headed theology that drives the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. It too abuses this nature of faith.

Let me say it one more time. Faith is the active response of obedience to the commands of Christ as we cling to his promises. Christ preceded and is always prior to faith and unbelief.

It is my opinion that this is the main point the author has here in chapter 11 – the nature of faith that is so crucial is that we must respond to God in faith.

In order to see just how plainly the author makes his point, there is a powerful transition that he made in the middle of our text. The unfortunate reality is that the ESV, which I read from, skipped right over it and made the transition subtle when it is clearly to be powerful.

Re-read the text with me and I will point out the transition.

The author wants to powerfully drive home in a kind of rapid-fire crescendo what the nature of true faith is. I mean, when you are finished reading chapter 11, you are supposed to feel your breath being taken away. These men and women of whom the world was not worthy are a group of people to be set forth as heroes.

The author wants to make one very powerful and plain point. But in order for him to make his point plain and powerful, I will reason by way of four points.

1. God can and does move his hand to bring help and help and deliverance to his people.

That is the point of verses 29-35a.

God moves his mighty hand in two ways: (1) He can move his hand visibly and (2) he can move his hand invisibly.

Visible Hand

What I mean by a visible hand is the working of God that involves some extraordinary interruption in the natural cause-effect way that nature works, i.e. **“miracles”**. The writer refers, for example,

- to the dividing of the Red Sea (verse 29)
- the falling down of the walls of Jericho (verse 30)
- the shutting of the mouths of lions when Daniel was in the lions' den (verse 33)
- the quenching of fire by Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, when they walked through Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (verse 34)

- the resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath (verse 35a)

All these are what we usually call miracles. God breaks into the normal way things work and in an extraordinary way makes them work differently. And in every case here the people of God were helped or rescued from danger or death.

That's one way God works through our faith - namely, by miracles.

Invisible Hand

A second way God moves his hand is by **“acts of providence”**. What I mean by "acts of providence" is works of God that control situations but in a less extraordinary way. Looking on, you would not necessarily say that a miracle happened, but by the eye of faith you see the "invisible hand of God" - as R. C. Sproul calls it.

For example, the writer refers to

- Rahab not perishing because she had heard of the power of the God of Israel (Joshua 2:9-11) and cared for the Jewish spies (verse 31)
- David conquering kingdoms and establishing righteousness (verse 33)
- Elijah escaping the sword of Jezebel (verse 34)
- to Gideon being strengthened in weakness (verse 34)
- to others putting foreign armies to flight (verse 34)

In all these cases God is the one who is working behind the scenes, but no miracles are obvious. This is what we may call the more ordinary working of God's providence.

And the point of the writer here in verses 29-35a is that all these wonderful acts of God - both extraordinary miracles and more ordinary acts of providence - come about "by faith." You see that:

(verse 29) By faith they passed through the red sea . . . (verse 30) by faith the walls of Jericho fell down . . . (verse 31) by faith Rahab . . . did not perish . . . (verse 33) by faith [they] conquered kingdoms . . .

The point is that God works through faith to do miracles and acts of providence to bring practical, earthly help and deliverance to his people. That's the first point. Here's the second point.

2. God can and does stay his mighty hand so as to sustain his people through sufferings.

That's the point of verses 35b-38. It means that your having faith in God is no guarantee of comfort and security in this life.

Now it is absolutely crucial for you to see that the miseries God's people sustained in verses 35-38 came by faith. They did not come because of unbelief.

You can see this in two ways:

1. In verse 33, notice that the list begins with ". . . who by faith conquered kingdoms . . . etc.," and without a break continues into all the miseries of verses 35-38. It is by faith that "others were tortured . . . and others experienced mockings and scourgings, etc." All this misery is received and endured by faith.
2. In verse 39 which looks back on all the sufferings of verses 35-38 and says, "And all these [that is, all suffering people], having gained approval through their faith, did not receive [yet in this life] what was promised." In other words the suffering and misery and destitution and torture of God's people in verses 35-38 are not owing to God's disapproval. Rather God's approval is

resting on them because of their faith. The miseries and sufferings were endured, not diminished, by faith.

Let's be specific, so we get the full impact of what this is saying. Verse 35b: "Others were tortured." God does not always turn the hearts of torturers away from their torture of his people, though he could.

The Bible frequently portrays God restraining and channeling the evil of men's hearts. For example, in Genesis 20:6 King Abimelech almost committed adultery with Abraham's wife, but didn't. Why? God says to Abimelech, "I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her." God restrained the evil intent of Abimelech's will. If God can do that to Abimelech, he can do it to the police chief who is about to torture a Baptist pastor in the back room of a Romanian jail (Joseph Tson). But he doesn't always do it. That is what verse 35b says. And when he doesn't, it does not mean that the suffering Christian does not have faith. Nor that God doesn't love him, as we will see in chapter 12.

Another example: God does not always lessen the agony of his children, but permits them to experience not just suffering, but horrific suffering. Verse 37: "They were stoned, they were sawn in two." Now this is almost too horrible to think about. It is the way tradition says that Isaiah died. Imagine how forsaken you might feel if death lies in front of you, and a person devises a way for your death to be as horrible as possible. That has happened and it has happened to people of whom the world was not worthy (as verse 38 says). God could stop that - without nullifying any human responsibility. That is the point of verse 29-35a - God can and does do miracles and acts of providence to relieve his people and deliver them, but not always.

This is perhaps clearest by contrasting a phrase in verse 34 and one in verse 37. In verse 34 the second clause says, "escaped the edge of the sword." So some by faith "escaped the edge of the sword." Then in verse 37 the fourth clause says, "They were put to death with the sword." So in one instance by faith they escaped the edge of the sword, and in another instance by faith they died by the sword. Acts 12:1-2 says, "About that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword." But the next verses tell the story of how he arrested Peter for the same purpose, but God intervened and miraculously delivered Peter. One died by faith. The other escaped by faith.

So the second point is: God does not always work miracles and acts of providence to deliver his people by faith, but sometimes by faith God sustains his people through horrendous sufferings.

NOW, Let's reason together. If it is by faith that God moves his hand in deliverance of his people and if it is equally by faith that he stays his hand so as to sustain his people through suffering, what is the point? There are two points:

3. Having faith is not the ultimate determining factor in whether you suffer or escape, God is!

To me this is immensely comforting. It is a great relief to know that there is a higher explanation for my pain or my pleasure than whether I have enough faith. Would it not be horrible to have to believe that on top of all your suffering you had to add this: it must be because I lack faith. That breeds defeat!

We cannot look into the face of the suffering or impoverished and say, or imply: "If you had faith, you could be healed or blessed with riches." Instead, we must say, "Trust in God, because whether you live by faith or die by faith God will take care of those who trust in him. To live is Christ, and to die is gain."

And ultimately, it is God, and not we, who decides when and how we live and die. He has his purposes. They are hidden from us. And faith means, we believe they are good.

Spurgeon said, "When I cannot see his hand, I will trust his heart!"

Cowper said, "Behind every cloud of providence, He hides a smiling face."

Can you trust that God is good when he designs for you to suffer?

Which leads to point four.

4. The faith that escapes and the faith that suffers is the same.

Both of them involve believing that God himself is better than what life can give to you now, and better than what death can take from you later.

When you can have it all, faith says that God is better; and when you lose it all, faith says God is better.

The clearest illustration of this in today's text is verse 35: "[by faith] women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection."

What does faith believe in the moment of torture? That if God loved me, he would get me out of this? No. Faith believes that there is a resurrection for believers which is better than the miracle of escape. It's better than the kind of resurrection experience by the widow's son, who returned to life only to die again later.

In other words, faith is utterly in love with all that God will be for us beyond the grave. Faith loves God more than life. Faith loves God more than family. Faith loves God more than job or retirement plans or ministry or building the dream house or making the first million.

Faith says, "Whether God handles me tenderly or gives me over to torture, I love him. He is my reward (11:6), the builder of the city I long for (11:10), the treasure beyond the riches of Egypt (11:26), and the possession that surpasses all others and abides for ever (10:34)."

Conclusion:

Return now to the wrong-headed theology of health, wealth and prosperity gospel and performance preaching.

Neither of these two ways of preaching, so popular in our day, prepares God's people for the true nature of faith. The true nature of faith will be apparent when the suffering comes. And suffering will come!

If you embrace either of these two theologies when the suffering comes, you will either be ready-made for defeat or denial. You will be ready made for denying God because you cannot believe that he designs suffering to come by faith. You believe that suffering comes when faith is weak or missing. But that is clearly not what the Bible teaches here in Hebrews 11.

Secondly, you will be set for defeat because you will not be able to see the smiling face of God behind the cloud; you will not be able to trust the heart of God because you will not have the eyes to see his hand, only the eyes to see your weakness. You will believe that God could not possibly be blessing you in the trial and by the trial for suffering only comes to those who do not perform. But that is clearly not what the Bible teaches here in Hebrews 11.

How could James chapter 1 command you to count it all joy when you fall into various kinds of turmoil and trial unless he knows that God is always behind the cloud?

Church get a big-picture view of God so that when the suffering hits, you are filled with joy knowing you will see God in the dark cloud.