

FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

Hebrews 11:29-40

Key Verse: 11:39

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.”

Thus far in Hebrews 11, the author has focused on the faith of great men in God’s history, especially Abraham and Moses. In the last part of this chapter, he mentions the faith of the community of God’s people. He also mentions many people of faith by name, as well as the acts of many others who were unnamed, presenting a great diversity of acts of faith. The common characteristic is that they were victorious without and within. We like to sing the song “Faith is the Victory,” but we need to understand what the victory of faith means. Sometimes this victory is tangible and achieves something great. If this is what we expect as the victory of faith, we will be disappointed when there is no tangible evidence. Then we can think that we are not victors, but losers. Yet the sure victory comes when we keep faith to the end of our lives—in any situation—and please God. Let’s learn the faith that God really wants us to have and live a truly victorious life.

First, the faith of God’s community and of the prostitute Rahab (29-31).

Verses 29-31 mention two key events in God’s history: crossing the Red Sea and conquering Jericho, during which Rahab’s story took place. In these two events, the author focused on the faith of the community of God’s people rather than their leaders, Moses and Joshua. Verse 29 says, **“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.”** The author contrasts the faith of God’s people with the Egyptians who did not know God. The event of crossing the Red Sea is described in Exodus 14. It was orchestrated by God for the purpose of planting faith in the hearts of his people and to display his glory to the Egyptians (14:4,31). When Pharaoh realized that the departure of the Israelite slaves would drastically change Egypt’s economy and lifestyle, he decided to pursue them with his chariots and horsemen. Upon seeing the army of Egypt approaching them, the Israelites were terrified. When fear filled their hearts they forgot everything God had done, and complained bitterly to Moses: **“Leave us alone! Let us serve the Egyptians! It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert.”**

FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

Though they were physically free from Egypt, they were still bound by a slave's mentality.

At this moment, Moses planted faith in God, saying, **“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring today...The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still”** (Ex 14:13-14). Then the LORD said to Moses, **“Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.”** “Move on!” That was God's command. Now they were in a dilemma: should they move on, or go back and return to slavery? When they looked at the walls of water on the right and left, it must have been scary. Would the water stay separated long enough for over a million people to pass through? They felt that they were risking their lives and families. Yet at this critical moment they listened to God's word and obeyed his direction, and they moved on by faith. They simply trusted God and his servant Moses. They had one mind and one spirit and moved together as one body. Then they could pass through the Red Sea as on dry land. Upon seeing this, the Egyptians thought, “Aha! Anything those Israelites can do, we can do better. We have chariots!” So they boldly tried to cross by their own effort. What was the result? God released the water and it swept them all away. They all drowned. Faith may seem like nothing. But having faith is a matter of life and death. God sees our hearts. We cannot deceive God. When we really trust God and have faith in our hearts, God knows this and is pleased by it and does something for us. When we depend on something else, such as military power, money and our own wisdom and experience, we cannot please God. The consequence of not pleasing God is serious. To God what matters is our faith. We can please God only by faith.

Another key event was the conquest of Jericho, which took place forty years after the people passed through the Red Sea. During that forty year period, all the Israelites who were 20 years old or over fell in the desert. It was due to their distrust of God and grumbling against God and his servant Moses. God regarded their unbelief as a very serious sin. So he swore with an oath that they would never enter his rest, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, who trusted God (Nu 14:28-30). Now, the Exodus generation was gone and a new generation, under the leadership of Joshua, was at the border of the Promised Land. Jericho was the first major city that needed to be conquered. But the problem was that Jericho was surrounded by a great

FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

earthen rampart with a stone retaining wall which was 15 feet high. On top of that wall were two more tiers of mudbrick walls, about six feet wide, that extended over 45 feet high.¹ The people of Jericho had shut themselves up behind these walls due to their fear. They were hunkered down to defend themselves. According to Sun Tzu (544-496 B.C.), in “The Art of War,” to make a frontal attack on such a city would require a force five times greater than the one in the city, and to siege the city would require a force ten times greater. The Israelites could have made some kind of strategy, such as digging tunnels under the ground like the North Koreans. But this would mean a long and costly war, and victory would not be guaranteed. They knew nothing about battle and did not have any weapons. It seemed difficult, actually impossible, for them to conquer the city.

At this moment, God instructed the army to march around the city once a day for six days, following the ark of the covenant, carried by priests. On the seventh day they were to march around it seven times with the priests blowing their trumpets. After hearing a long blast on the trumpets the army was to give a loud shout. Then the wall of the city would collapse and they could go straight in. According to human reason, this was an odd way to fight a battle. They seemed vulnerable to enemy attacks. They could have been fearful and doubted God’s plan. But they simply trusted God. They followed the ark of God, which symbolized his presence and his word. Every day they marched around with prayerful hearts. Then God was pleased with their faith and he made the walls of Jericho fall. This is the victory of faith.

From these two events we learn the importance of the faith of God’s community. The author intentionally focused on the people and the army, not just their leaders. This tells us that God works not just through one person’s faith, but through the faith of his people as a community. God wants us as his church to strive together as one for the faith of the gospel (Php 1:27b). The enemies of the gospel are strong. When we look at the world, anti-Christian elements are rapidly increasing. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). Satan’s power is behind media and organizations that promote sinful lifestyles while seeking to destroy Christian values. Satan works through those who trust in money to turn people against God. We cannot fight against this with

¹ <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/06/The-Walls-of-jericho>

FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

our own wisdom and the democratic system. We need God's help. So we should not fight with human means. Rather we need to put on the full armor of God and take up the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God. And we need to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph 6:17-18). Sometimes we feel that our Bible study ministry and prayer is insignificant. But these are the spiritual weapons that God uses with his divine power. Paul says, “...**they have divine power to demolish strongholds**” (2Co 10:4b). Let's continue to study and teach the God's word diligently and to pray. God can use us to demolish the spiritual forces of evil in our time.

In conquering Jericho, Rahab's role was crucial. She was one of the Canaanites, who were an idol worshiping people, and a prostitute. Humanly speaking, the Israelite spies were her enemies. But she welcomed them and defended them, at the risk of her own life. It was because she saw the one true God at work through them and she believed he would keep his promises to them. So she stood on God's side, instead of with her own people who were corrupted and facing God's judgment. God honored her faith and saved her as well as her household. Furthermore, God included her in the genealogy of the Messiah Jesus Christ (Mt 1:5). This shows us very clearly that what matters to God is only faith.

Second, diverse acts of faith that won victory without and within (32-38).

There are so many heroes of faith that the author did not have time to tell about all of them. But he mentions a few of them by name and highlights some significant acts of faith by unnamed people. Gideon was hiding in a winepress in order to survive under the oppressive Midianites. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, “**The LORD is with you mighty warrior**” (Jud 6:12). Though he was a weak man from a weak tribe, he believed God was with him. When God gave him direction to reduce his army from 32,000 soldiers to just 300 (Jud 7:5-6), he obeyed. Then God gave him a great victory over the Midianite army. Barak, the commander of Israel's army, hesitated to attack the enemy. God spoke to him through the prophetess Deborah, and he advanced by faith and won a victory. Samson was a Nazirite whom God endowed with great strength. But he was seduced by Delilah and lost all his strength. He doesn't seem to have any virtue; rather, he caused a lot of trouble due to his fleshly desires. But at the last moment he repented and cried out to God for mercy. Then God gave him strength to destroy many

FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

enemy leaders. Jephthah was a mighty warrior. But he was from a very fatalistic background. His mother was a prostitute and he was driven away from his father by his stepbrothers. However, when they were in trouble because of Ammonite oppression, they asked him to be their leader. By faith he defeated the enemies, even though he sacrificed his beloved daughter.

By faith David defeated Goliath. Later he subdued many enemy kingdoms and united Israel as one nation under God. He administered justice and ruled with righteousness and peace. This foreshadowed the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom to come. Samuel served the Lord as a Bible teacher going on circuits throughout Israel. God blessed his ministry by bringing spiritual revival to Israel and raising kings. Other unnamed people performed great acts also. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; their weakness was turned to strength and they became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies (33b-34). Women received back their dead, raised to life again (35a). When they faced impossible situations they did not shrink back in fear and despair. Rather, they trusted God. By faith they overcame fatalism, weaknesses, sorrows, temptation, and even the power of death. Though they were all different people, in different circumstances and time periods, they all expressed faith in God in a critical moment and won great victories. When we have faith in God, we can experience great victories, overcoming all adversity. Paul said, **“I can do all things through him who gives me strength”** (Php 4:13).

In verse 35b the author transitions from faith that wins a tangible victory to faith that wins an inner, invisible victory. **“There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins—destitute, persecuted and mistreated”** (35b-37). They were in hard situations and suffered, not because they committed sin, or because of a natural disaster, but because they confessed their faith in God. If they had compromised a little bit, they would have avoided this persecution and lived a comfortable life in this world. They could have been recognized and praised by people in the world instead of receiving insults, flogging, chains and imprisonment. However, they didn't shrink back and lose their confidence in

FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

God in the midst of severe persecution. They didn't sell their souls for their physical wellbeing. They didn't sell the truth in order to earn money or gain power. They did not distort their faith by excluding important truths, or adding their own ideas; they kept pure gospel faith. When they kept the faith, God enabled them to persevere to the end and pass it on to the next generation. Worldly people regarded them as old-fashioned and foolish, and treated them harshly. But the truth is that the world was not worthy of them (38a). So they lived as outcasts from society. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground (38b). When I attended a CIS director's conference, I had a chance to visit the caves in Cappadocia where some of the early Christians lived during a time of government persecution. It was like an underground house that went several stories down. There were small rooms for sleeping and cooking. The second underground floor had a larger common area for corporate worship and celebrating communion. They lived in such a way simply to keep their faith.

When we see these people, outwardly they were defeated and look like victims and losers. But from God's perspective they were truly victors. Heavenly hope gave them inner strength to endure all kinds of sufferings. Their lives were paradoxical: outwardly they were defeated, but inwardly they were more than conquerors. The Apostle Paul lived by this faith and testified: **"We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything"** (2Co 6:8-10 NLT).

Third, together with us made perfect (39-40). After giving many examples of faith, the author made his point in verse 39: **"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised...."** All those who lived by faith were commended by God, yet they did not receive what had been promised. But they did not complain, nor were they bitter. They did not doubt God's love or character. Rather they fully trusted God because they knew whom they believed. They believed that God himself was their reward and that he would not disappoint them. This pleased God. The purpose of living by faith is not merely to gain what is promised, but to please

FAITH THAT PLEASURES GOD III: ALL COMMENDED FOR THEIR FAITH

God. Some people begin the life of faith expecting some tangible fruit. When they do not see it, they feel a sense of loss. They say, "I dedicated my youth, the prime of my life; who can compensate me?" Then they doubt God's love and shrink back. But the heroes of faith are those who pleased God with their faith, even though they had no tangible fruit. Here we learn that to please God and be commended by him is more important than receiving what is promised.

How did God plan to reward those who lived by faith? Verse 40 says, **"...since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."** In the book of Hebrews the word "better" is repeated many times: a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6), better sacrifices (9:23), better and lasting possessions (10:34), a better country (11:16), a better resurrection (11:35), a better plan (11:40), a better word (12:24). These all refer to Jesus, and the heavenly city where Jesus rules, and to the eternal life in glory which God's people share with him. Jesus is far better than anything else in the world. Jesus is superior to anything or anyone else. To know Jesus is of surpassing worth. Jesus is everything to us. God prepared this Jesus and sent him to us as our Savior, Lord and King, and Great High Priest. The heroes of faith in the Old Testament were looking forward to seeing the Messiah, Jesus. Jesus came according to God's promise. Since then, New Testament believers put their faith in Jesus directly. Through Jesus, Old and New Testament believers are made perfect and united into one. This is God's plan for them and for us. God's plan goes far beyond what we see and experience in our lifetimes. Ultimately God's plan is to bring all things, in heaven and on earth together, under the reign of his glorious King and our Savior, Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10). Let's keep our faith to the end of our lives and please God by faith.