

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-40

Message: Faith in Greater Things

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There are so many stories from people of faith which tell about the wonderful things God has done in their lives. Prayers are answered. Healing is experienced. Relationships restored. Protection is received. Finances are provided.

The stories are told to share the blessing of having faith in God. Faith in God is such a comfort in difficult times. Faith is answered in so many ways. Have faith in God and good things will happen.

Then, as I read through Hebrews 11 a few times, I was moved to see a different side of faith. Faith seems to be presented as believing in God anyway, even when what is prayed for/ longed for/ desired/ begged for is not realized. Have faith in God, even when good things do not happen.

It brings to mind the words of Habakkuk 3:17-19

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” As we read Hebrews 11, that theme of “hope for” and “not see” seems to be the focus or emphasis. After a whole chapter about various individuals who lived in faith, who believed, who trusted God, who followed him, we read in verse 39, “yet none of them received what had been promised.”

They hoped for healing, but the cancer continued to grow.

They hoped for forgiveness, but the other person continued to hate them.

They hoped for a child, but never got pregnant.

They hoped for safety, but the bombs continued to fall.

They hoped for a better job, but continued to work for minimum wage.

They hoped for an end to torture, but it continued.

They hoped for freedom, but remained in prison.

They hoped for... but...

“And they were commended for their faith” (see Hebrews 11:2 and 39)

Hebrews 11 can be read as a glorious chapter of faith, of heroes of faith who believed in God against all odds.

Hebrews 11 can be read as a discouraging chapter of unrealized hopes, dashed dreams, pain and sadness, disappointment and letdown.

The difference in the approach to reading and understanding this chapter is found in part in verse 6, “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Believe that God exists. Believe in a God who is real, who creates, who cares, who provides, who gives purpose and hope.

This is part of believing in greater things. We don't draw our conclusions about life and the future from what we see around us, or from what people are doing, or from what we are experiencing, or from what we read in the news. We believe in something, someone, greater. We believe in a God who is greater than any person, any event, any enemy, any sickness. We believe in a God who can create a world out of nothing. We believe in a God who has a purpose and a hope for this creation and all that is in it.

Hope is another key to understanding Hebrews 11 as a chapter of hope and encouragement. We read in verse 10, “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Then in verses 13-16, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.... they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

And also verse 39-40, “...none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

Something better. Looking forward. Longing. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

Why doesn't God make *this* life easier? Why doesn't God just end persecution? Why doesn't God send an earthquake to open the jail to release those persecuted for their faith, like he did for Paul and Silas? Why doesn't Jesus just calm the stormy waves instead of

allowing ships to sink? Why doesn't Jesus quiet the stormy winds and send rain, instead of letting those winds blow a forest fire over a town?

What good is faith in this life? What good does it do to believe God exists when he doesn't seem to be doing anything?

For one thing, faith is not based on what we get. Nor is it only about getting what we want or whatever we ask for. Faith is not based on answers that we see. Faith is not based on evidence that *proves* anything.

Faith, by definition, trusts in something/someone greater. Faith believes what will be, even if it isn't now. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith believes, because faith believes there is a God who is greater than anything and everything we experience on this earth. Faith believes in a God who promises greater things than anything we experience on this earth.

Faith requires something/someone to believe in. Faith believes in a God who is personal and responds to the cry of his creatures by graciously providing mercy and forgiveness for those who repent and put their trust in him. Faith believes in a personal God who is just and holy and who has a loving concern for his creatures in this life and in a glorious eternity.

Faith believes in a God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to be our Saviour, to defeat the power of sin that wreaks havoc. We live in the already and not yet: Jesus has already come and won the victory, but we do not yet experience that victory in its perfect fullness. We believe in greater things, in the day when our victory will be perfect and complete.

We are certain that the greater things, the glorious city, the perfect victory will come because we have been given a taste of that victory in Jesus.

Let me explain it in this way. This past week we had a dumping of snow. Winter has arrived. But we are certain that spring will come. We are certain that we will not live in perpetual winter. How do we know that?

For one thing, we have the proof of history. We have the proof of past years when spring has come.

For another, we know that spring will come because some of us have planted tulip bulbs and crocus bulbs and winter wheat. We have put the seed of a plant in the ground in

the certain hope that there will be a season of warmth when that tulip or crocus will grow and bloom and there will be a wheat harvest.

When we look to the cross and the empty grave, we see the destructive power of sin and death, but we also see the ultimate victory of life. We are certain that the suffering and death and power of sin we see in the world around us will not last forever. We are certain that it will end, because Jesus has already won the victory.

Hebrews 11 speaks of this by saying that God has prepared for them, for us, a city. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. My Father's house has plenty of room; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:1-3).

Or as the apostle Paul says, "... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me....Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus....Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:12-14, 20).

This is not a denial of reality around us. Living as "strangers and exiles on earth," longing for "something better" which God has planned for us, is not an unearthly perspective. It's not that we are "so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good." Rather, it is a perspective that includes the restoration of the whole creation to that perfect harmony of purpose and function for which it was created. We join in working at God's purpose now, in hope of that glorious city someday. We work at a restored creation now, in hope of the new heaven and new earth.

Sometimes we can give a simplistic answer to someone who is going through a difficult time. "Just have faith." "Just believe." It might sound nice. But that could sound like it depends on us to have enough faith or to believe enough.

Think of the picture of a person who falls off a cliff and grabs hold of a branch. Is the focus on whether or not the person can hold on to the branch? Or is the focus on whether or not the branch is strong enough to keep me from falling?

It's not about whether *our* faith is good enough or strong enough. We can easily focus on *why* this is happening, or *how* I will endure, or *when* will things change. Or we can trust

that the God we believe in is real and his Word is true. Faith is not a blind leap, hoping we got it right. Faith is a certain trust and sure hope in God and his work and world.

We see this lived out in the stories of history: all those individuals who trusted and believed and lived their faith point to a faithful God.

That is why I also read the first verses of chapter 12 along with Hebrews 11. After naming those many people in chapter 11, the author continues, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses." Since we have all these people, whom we know but cannot see, cheering us on, including Abraham, Moses, great-grandpa, our kindergarten teacher and so many other, let us "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

As we run that race, throw off the sin that tangles and trips us. Live in obedient trust. When we forgive and are forgiven, when we obey, when we live in self-control, when we express the reality of the Holy Spirit within us in patience and kindness, we are expressing our faithful trust. Evidence of the Spirit's work is a guarantee that what God says and does is true.

Keep the focus on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He suffered, died and rose again, as the author of our faith and the one in whom that faith will become perfect and complete someday.

He has gone before us, as one of us. Jesus, our brother, has opened the way to heaven for us. Faith does not depend on whether we have enough faith or if it is good enough. Our faith rests on the foundation of Jesus, on the promises of our faithful God.

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Faith in greater things: a greater God, a greater promise, a greater eternity, a greater victory. Made certain through our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, who is with us, now and always.

To God be the glory!

Amen.