

FAITH UNDER FIRE

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

By Steve Zeisler

One of our elders, Bob Roe, visited our home last week and noticed various orange colored cutouts taped to the walls. “Halloween must be coming,” he said. His comment reminded me how different life is for people whose offspring have already grown up and left the home from those of us whose children have spent the last month eagerly anticipating the Halloween season, their minds stimulated by visions of candy, costumes and parades.

The opening verse of Hebrews 11 makes the following announcement about the nature of faith: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” For Christians, a day is coming when the history of this planet as we understand it will end, and the Lord Jesus will descend from heaven again to be present among his people. That is the day when all the impediments that hinder us from seeing him exactly as he is will disappear.

Faith supremely means that we can apprehend what is unseen, what is yet in the future. If the coming of Halloween can influence our children’s behavior, how much more should Christians be influenced by what lies ahead for them? We serve an unseen God, yet we are certain of his power and his authority in our lives. We trust him. Unseen and future things, therefore, are much more important than what we can see and touch. This, then, is the thrust of the argument of Hebrews 11: the nature of faith and what it means to live by faith.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16)

The gospel of Christ is good news about both the present and the future, the “already” and the “not yet.” Paul declared that Christ Jesus “abolished death and brought life (now) and immortality (forever) to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10).

Our life in Christ has impact on us in the here and now. Within our earthen pots there is dwelling a treasure, the Lord God himself. Our relationship with him is deep and abiding; we are being transformed by him. But it is also true to say that we are unfinished, we are still in process as Christians. Part of the gospel message holds out the hope that there is a fuller way in which the promises will be completed in us. It is also true to say that the more we grow in Christ the more hungry we are for what yet remains to be done.

One of my favorite people is a woman who is well into her eighties. Because she has a severe case of arthritis, she finds it difficult to attend church services and spends much of her time at home. She was raised by godly parents in the pioneer west, in Texas, and learned to emulate her father, a Sunday school teacher. Her family roots go back to England, to the time of the Wesleyan revival and early Methodism. She married, raised a family, and worked as a schoolteacher for many years. The next season of her life saw her caring for her ailing husband and her sister. These days she uses her time to study

the Scriptures and pray, her physical incapacity allowing time for reflection that was not possible previously. Gratitude is the dominant theme of her life. Despite what she may have thought at the time, none of the many changing seasons in her life has lasted, yet in each one of them Jesus Christ was central.

We all pass from one season in life to another. No stage along the way, whether difficult or delightful, will last forever. Christians must remember that during their time on earth they are merely passing through, that this life but precedes our glorious going to be with Jesus.

Here in Hebrews 11, the word “exiles” or “sojourners” is used to describe Jesus’ followers. The closest contemporary word may be “refugees.” A number of people in this church are refugees from various countries in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. Different circumstances forced them to leave their countries and come here. They are not yet citizens of this nation. They participate to some extent in the life of this nation, but they do not officially belong here yet either. They are refugees. The Scriptures say that that is what Christians are during their time on this earth. We were born with a mind-set directed toward self-interest, toward serving the flesh. Our citizenship was in the rebellion of Adam. But then, when we came to Christ, we left behind our first home. We inhabit a land where we may serve God, but we are not here to stay.

Abraham supremely fits the description of a sojourner. He left his family in Haran, the old country, and by faith traveled to a new country. Although God promised Abraham’s family the land of Canaan, he was never allowed (except for a burial plot) to own property in it. This taught Abraham an important lesson: his spiritual home was not here on this earth; he was created for something greater than this world could ever offer him. Thus he discovered the lesson of faith, that if we counted among those who trust God, we are here on earth for just a season. We are refugees. This world and all it has to offer will never finally satisfy us.

Before we were married, my life Leslie spent three months in Europe. That time of separation made me realize as never before just how much I loved her and missed her. I read and reread her letters, and listened over and over to the sound of her voice in the tapes she sent me, but all that did for me was make me feel even more acutely how much I missed her. While it was wonderful to have those letters and tapes from her, it was not ultimately satisfying to me. It just made me long all the more for her return.

The same should be true of our Christian lives. When we read the Scriptures we hear the voice of God and are thrilled by that, our lives are changed by it, but it serves to make us all the more hungry for him. We look forward to more in the life to come.

As a sojourner, the greatest danger I face is not that I will be tempted to return to the old country, but that I will settle down in the promised land and begin to believe that this is all there is. I fear that what living in this area offers—a wonderful church, good friends, a lovely climate, nice children, sufficient money to be happy, in a community I care about—will be sufficient. I fear that, unlike Abraham, what I have been given may woo me away from seeking the “city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Do the gifts, which God has given us, make us want the Giver even more? Everything God does for us in this life ought to make us seek him with greater hunger than we ever have before.

We have already noted that this chapter is a short course on Old Testament history. Hebrews 11:17 begins another section in which a series of snapshots from the family album of Israel are displayed.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "" IN ISAAC YOUR

DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. (Hebrews 11:17-31)

Abraham supremely demonstrated his faith in God on the occasion when he was called upon to sacrifice his own son. He was convinced that if he did so, God would raise Isaac from the dead. In this story we recognize one of those sobering moments in life when God asks us to do something for which there is absolutely no rational explanation—when it is impossible to understand why we have been given a particular assignment. Perhaps a much loved son or daughter is taken in death. Perhaps one who has seemingly endless potential in the service of God is suddenly taken. How can we explain such things? “Why should this happen?” we ask. We are convinced that no good can result from such a tragedy. God had promised that Isaac was the son whose children would receive the promise. What sense was there in sacrificing him? Abraham did not insist that God explain.

But he was convinced that if Isaac should die, God would raise him again. That is when he began to believe in the God of resurrection. He saw that there are times when God does not grant us understanding, that it is sufficient for us that we trust him. If death must occur, resurrection will surely follow. So we can still trust God even at times when no explanation seems possible for what is happening. Abraham knew that God would not fail to keep his promise to him, even if that meant sacrificing his only son Isaac.

The stories of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph follow, each of whom had a word of blessing or an assignment for the next generation. What we see in each of these three men is a life that, having run its course, still remained certain of the promises of God. Isaac and Jacob believed God and spoke of the great nation that would come from them. Knowing that, they gave their children a blessing, a pronouncement based on the certainty that God would do what he had promised. Joseph was certain that his people would possess the land because God had promised they would possess it. He arranged it so that, many generations later, his descendants carried his bones for burial in the land which God had promised them.

The story of Moses is the story of a battle with worldliness. The Pharaohs had absolute power to do whatever they chose. They were considered not only human kings but gods too. They ruled without restriction of any kind. They were ruthless, wealthy, worldly kings. Yet neither Moses nor his parents gave way to fear in their battle with worldly power. Hebrews 11:27 says of Moses, “...he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.” Pharaoh attempted to frighten Moses, to demand obedience from him, but Moses refused. He trusted instead an unseen God who was greater than the god of Egypt whom he could see. He was not afraid of what this world could do to him, and he was willing to be different as a result.

That is an important element if we would be faithful. At times we are going to have to do battle with the world systems, and we must not fear that. We must be certain that the power of God is greater than the power of the king of Egypt.

The second thing we read of Moses in his refusal to go along with the Pharaoh's command is told us in 11:25: "He chose rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin." The world not only attempted to frighten him, it tried to entrap him as well. He was offered wealth, power and esteem, but he refused "the passing pleasures of sin."

That phrase gives great insight into the nature of sin. Does it offer pleasure? Yes. Do the entanglements of the world promise some advantage? Yes. But they do not last. Passing pleasures leave only emptiness and loss behind. Moses knew that. So by faith he was not afraid. By faith he was not enticed. By faith he led his people out of Egypt:

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, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 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. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. 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 (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:32-40)

Hebrews 11:39 reminds us again of Hebrews 11:13: "All these died in faith without receiving the promises, but having seen them and welcomed them from a distance, having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." Hebrews 11:39 says, "These, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised." They looked beyond for what God would grant them.

We have received the promises of God. We have the opportunity to live by faith right now, and we must do so. But as we increasingly live by faith, as we see our trust in God growing, we will also see growing in us a sense of longing for what we do not have yet, longing for the day when the final enemy will be defeated utterly and nothing will separate us from intimacy with God.

Let us think for a moment about this list of Old Testament believers that begins in Hebrews 11:32. We will discuss two general points. First, we have before us a cast of characters who, in one sense are not particularly prominent in the history of Israel—unlike Moses, Abraham and Isaac. Some of these figures actually lived during the period between the Old and the New Testaments, during the reign of the Maccabees. This should indicate to us that this kind of faith, which the chapter is addressing, is not peculiar to heroes only, to the high profile, dominant figures of Old Testament history. All of us are urged to live by faith, from the highest to the lowliest among us.

It is also true that these people spoken of here were flawed individuals, yet they trusted God and lived by faith. Take the six men mentioned in Hebrews 11:32. With the possible exception of Samuel, who had a minor black mark registered against him, every single one of these men contributed a major disaster to the biblical record. The message here is that our previous

bad histories do not count. What matters is that, beginning today, we increasingly find ourselves filled with confidence in God and that we begin to take the risks that he has put before us, believing and trusting in his power to deliver us.

The second general observation I would like to make about Hebrews 11:32-40 is to point out two different ways in which God acted in the lives of those mentioned. In some cases he allowed a transcendent victory. Some of these people achieved marvelous and stupendous things. Daniel sat all night in the lions' den and God stopped the mouths of hungry lions. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fiery furnace unscathed while their captors did not survive the heat even as they approached the very doors of the furnace. God does allow at times a tremendous, miraculous victory for his people. The life of faith can include such things. But he also allows these others things" mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment...they were sawn in two...put to death with the sword..." Not all of these stories end in transcendent victory. But God is equally present in the lives of those who have learned to trust him and yet must face tremendous pressure and suffering

A tragedy of modern church life is that we often hear one or the other of these emphases but rarely do we hear both. Some Christians hold that God wants us all to be rich, happy and trouble free. If illness, deprivation or difficulty strikes, they declare, it must be because we do not have sufficient faith. After all, they say, God responds to faith, and part of his response is to make believers victorious and successful. Others say we should not expect much from God. Just grit your teeth, keep a low profile, have low expectations and God will be pleased with you. He likes suffering and endurance, so just endure.

Neither one of these viewpoints in itself is true. At times God wants us to be adventurous, to try something unpredictable, to dare to do things that do not come naturally to us, and trust him for the results. But at other times God will call us into circumstances where we must suffer, from which there is no escape. That is when he wants us to hold our heads high and rely on him. Those responses are just as God-honoring as the occasions when victories are won. In either case, what is important is that we trust God. That is what is pleasing to him.

Hebrews 11 really ends with the first verse of chapter 12, where the formal conclusion is drawn: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..." (Hebrews 12:1). "A great cloud of witnesses..." Voice after voice from the Old Testament declare that God is trustworthy. Let us respond by choosing to run the race with endurance. "Let us also lay aside every encumbrance..." Let us lay aside the heavy weights which we carry around with us—guilt, a feeling of uselessness, self-hatred, lack of worth. Throw them off. You are not guilty. Your sins have been paid for. You are not responsible to make yourself different. God has made you different, so throw off the heavy weights and start the race. To those who are entangled in the passing pleasures of sin, those who are easily trapped, sidetracked and drawn aside from the race, the word here is, stop it! "Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us."

Hebrews 11 ends at verse 40, but the testimony continues—lives lived by faith in Christ that have a great effect on their age. The record of those of whom this world is not worthy, those who had faith in God and ran the race with endurance, who trusted the Lord and accomplished mighty things, or suffered terribly in the process, is still being kept. You and I can be part of that heavenly record. We can be among those whose lives will lead to the glorification of Christ. Only sojourners qualify.

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