

# **THE GOD OF HISTORY**

*SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH*  
By Steve Zeisler

Throughout this series in Hebrews 11 we have used a metaphor of running a race—undeterred by obstacles, our eyes fixed on Jesus. Arrayed above us in the arena, clad in white like a cloud of witnesses, are those who have run the race before us. We’ve come to the last verses of our chapter, and we’re going to draw some conclusions about this gathering of believers observed all together. Verses 38a, 39-40:

**(Men of whom the world was not worthy)...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.**

I want to make an observation about each of three ideas in these verses. The first idea is in verse 38: “men of whom the world was not worthy.” That is, the world did not belong in their company. The second idea is that we do belong in their company, though we might not always feel that we do. And the third is that God has provided something better.

## **The way that proves worthy**

The phrase “men of whom the world was not worthy” is inspiring, but we might ask what it teaches. The author is looking back over the whole sweep of the chapter, and suddenly what he’s writing seems to move him deeply. He realizes it is a privilege to know about such people, to call attention to them. His words almost cry out, “The world was not worthy of them!”

The writer is observing a truth about believers in every generation: that they are in the world—a place, a culture, a context—but not of the world system. And if there is something different about those who know God, then a question is posed: who has made the wisest decision, those who follow God, or those who go along with the world in which they find themselves?

Measured only in the short term, those who take Christ most seriously, follow him most fully, and align themselves with his purposes most honorably are marginalized and mistreated by the majority culture. But if we look at the end of the story, at history as it will be someday, those who have given themselves fully to God have made the wise choice. They will be seated in places of honor.

In every time and place the world calls for our allegiance. The dominant culture will raise idols in defiance of God and demand that we obey them. The life of faith will always be costly. Avoidance, hypocrisy, and double-mindedness can be sustained only so long. Eventually we have to choose either the world’s approval or faithfulness in following the Lord.

There is a great scene at the end of the book of Joshua. The children of Israel have re-entered the land that God promised them, with a chance for a new beginning. Their stalwart leader Joshua,

who has been with them the whole way, looks back with them on what God has accomplished, and looks forward to the responsibilities that are yet to come, and he says to the people gathered before him, “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” (Joshua 24:15, NIV.) Joshua’s call for a decision is one that we have to answer. No one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

This phrase in Hebrews 11:38, “men of whom the world was not worthy,” gives us an important perspective on the choice. Today the broad road is easy and the narrow road costly, but consider the end of the journey. One day, those who have been ridiculed and mistreated for their faith will occupy the highest place, and those who have only credentials issued by idols will not be worthy of them.

## **Approval by faith**

The second observation I want to make regards a question we might ask as we look back at those we admire. We have said that the world was not worthy of them. Are we worthy of them? When we look at folks who have gone before us, it’s easy to see ourselves as not being able to live up to the standards set by those who have gone before. It’s particularly true when we’re thinking of legendary heroes. For Jews, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and the others are the greatest names. These were people who lived in the times when God did extraordinary miracles. In their company we may be inspired or we may feel overwhelmed. It’s true that they were admirable, that they trusted God, that they accomplished important things. But how does that help us? We live in a time when God’s presence is less discernible, and we live with inadequacies that seem overwhelming.

The problem of romanticizing the past and struggling in the present is one that every generation faces, isn’t it? But the argument of these verses is helpful to us. The first thing to note is that what pleased God about any individual in any age was not how special or remarkable they were to begin with. They were made of exactly the same stuff as we are, with exactly the same weaknesses and foibles and fears. What pleased God was their faith. Faith is always what pleases God. In our time and place, do we trust him, or not?

When we read the Bible thoughtfully, we realize that everybody’s warts are on display. The men and women who strike us as heroic when viewed from a distance are only clay vessels when viewed at close range. They didn’t end their lives thinking, “I have made the world a better place by being here. Everything has come out exactly right.” They ended their lives wishing that they were different, as sure of their inadequacies as we are of ours.

“All these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised....

Apart from us they would not be made perfect.” The gospel joins generations together. We realize that God, instead of dividing us by elevating some and demeaning others, has brought us together with those who have gone before. He has not put us down by what they accomplished.

Whether we look as far back as the Old Testament, or only as far back as our childhood, how do we measure up? I've talked to scores of parents in the modern era who don't feel at all confident about their parenting. They feel responsible to be strong, capable, and effective breadwinners, domestic superheroes, engaged parents alert to every problem, and it's an impossible assignment to live up to—and yet other generations succeeded. They ask, “What's wrong with me?” Or consider Christian leaders looking back—the Bible teachers, the evangelists, the Sunday school teachers who went before seemed to get it done without struggling so much. Admiration can weigh a lot.

Our daughter Sarah will marry Jake Dodson soon, and I've been wondering what contribution I can make to Jake (and to our son Jeff's wife Carrie). You see, I had the world's greatest father-in-law! Fred Vann's love, generosity, and wisdom set a high standard that I feel inadequate to match.

If we praise those who have gone before too much, do we elevate them to the point where we discourage ourselves? The argument in these verses is that when the day comes that we are in Jesus' presence, all of us will be on the same level. Apart from us they won't be made perfect. All of us will sing the same song of praise to Jesus, for the same reason, acknowledging the same gratitude.

God is still the same, and our best, most certain hope is that he will keep his promises. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6, NIV.) The reason we can step forward is not because of ourselves, but because of the One who is committed to us, who loves us, who will not fail us. However much we admire or feel overwhelmed by those in the past, our Lord is present with us in this time and place.

### **“He has spoken to us by his Son”**

The last observation I want to make about this passage concerns the statement “God had provided something better....” The saints of the Old Testament to whom the writer refers all had a disadvantage in comparison to us. They knew that Yahweh was the Lord of history, and that history was going to end in the victory of God, the removal of evil, and the restoration of what was broken to something beautiful again. They knew that he would use people to accomplish it, that they had a role to play. But they did not know the crucial, remarkable thing that would take place in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus. They could not see that God himself would become human, would join us here—enter into our suffering, meet us in our poverty, understand our struggle, and pay the price for our failure.

Something better has been given us. We know about Jesus. We know what he was like, what he said, how he treated people. We've heard him pray. We've seen him love to the uttermost. We can worship with truth that was unavailable to them.

The book of Hebrews as a whole is an extraordinary hymn to the greatness of Christ. It teaches us better and fuller ways to think about Jesus. It opens with these verses: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he

made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Hebrews 1:1-3a, NIV.) Something better has been given to us than even to those who tower over history. The Lord spoke from heaven and said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35.) And we may do so.

The ancients knew a Messiah would come. What they did not know is that when we meet the Messiah at his second coming, when we see him change the world forever, he'll have scars on his hands. Something better has been given us—the privilege of knowing God in the person of Jesus.

Accordingly, we should take advantage of the opportunity to worship Jesus. I invite you to personalize the lyrics of a great old hymn, *Crown Him with Many Crowns*. What crown might you lay at Jesus' feet? How might you give him the honor he deserves?

"Crown Him with many crowns,  
The Lamb upon His throne.  
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns  
All music but its own!  
Awake, my soul, and sing  
Of Him who died for thee,  
And hail Him as thy matchless King  
Through all eternity.

"Crown Him the Lord of love!  
Behold His hands and side—  
Rich wounds, yet visible above,  
In beauty glorified.  
All hail, Redeemer, hail!  
For Thou hast died for me:  
Thy praise and glory shall not fail  
Throughout eternity.

"Crown Him the Lord of life!  
Who triumphed o'er the grave;  
Who rose victorious in the strife  
For those He came to save.  
His glories now we sing,  
Who died and rose on high,  
Who died eternal life to bring  
And lives that death may die.

"Crown Him the Lord of heav'n!  
One with the Father known,  
One with the Spirit through Him giv'n  
From yonder glorious throne.

To Thee be endless praise,  
For Thou for us hast died.  
Be Thou, O Lord, through endless days  
Adored and magnified!" (1)

## Notes

1. Matthew Bridges and Godfrey Thring, text of *Crown Him with Many Crowns*.

Where indicated, Scripture is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION © Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved. All other Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE ("NASB"). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 5250  
Hebrews 11:38a, 39-40  
Eleventh Message  
Steve Zeisler  
October 21, 2007

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2007 [Discovery Publishing](#) the publications ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made, in writing, and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-3695.