

### 3 KINDS OF FAITH Hebrews 11:32-40

All through December we've been talking about faith from Hebrews 11- faith is faith in God's promise of a future reality. We've seen that from almost every example listed faith causes people to act; not just to sit around, but to do something as a response to God's promises. For many of the original hearers of the book of Hebrews, they needed to hear examples of faith in the face of suffering.

In the passage we're looking at today almost every person mentioned faced death. And it looks like one list, but it's actually two lists. As we read this list, we are going to be forced to ask the questions: What is our attitude towards suffering? What is our attitude towards failure? We're going to see 3 kinds of faith: Winning, Losing, and what I call Basic Faith.

#### *Winning Faith*

Verses 32-35a chronicle many of the Old Testament saints who triumphed (he started with the patriarchs, now judges, kings and prophets). They faced trials and suffering but were spared death. In the process they became strong and were good stories.

This is like my dad's side of the family; there is a history of serious health issues but excellent recoveries. My dad and my uncle have both had cancer recently and recovered well. My aunt was close to death for a while last year but back teaching within a month. They faced trials and those trials made them stronger.

We all will face trials but some of us will overcome, by God's grace. This is the report we all want to hear- they won, she was healed, he came back!

#### *Losing Faith*

But the second half of verse 35 takes the list in a completely different direction with the word 'others.' These are the people who face trials but do not overcome them in this life. Awful things happened to this group: they were tortured, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, and some killed with the sword (in stark contrast to verse 34 in the first list, 'escaped the edge of the sword').

This is my mom's side of the family. There's a history of health issues that have lead to death. My grandfather died when I was in high school, my cousin died of a rare disease when she was 12. For whatever reason, God did not deliver them from death.

The preacher is reminding his audience that this could happen to them for their faithfulness to Christ. They might die. But, here's the thing: *their faith is no different from those who overcome* ! Look at a few of the names implied in the first half of the list: Daniel (shut the mouths of lions) and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (quenched the power of fire). They were all willing to die for their faith, but God spared them. Or look at David and Jonathan. Both were faithful to God and to each other, but one triumphed and one died in a battle far from home. Or how about Jesus' apostles Peter and James in Acts 12- Peter is delivered from the sword, while James is killed by King Herod's sword. There is no difference in their faith or character, simply God's purpose in their lives.

I love this phrase in verse 38, 'of whom the world was not worthy'- the world is not worthy of God's martyrs. But too often we look at that those who are hurting or

failing at something and think 'they must have done something wrong, they're just not good enough.' This, by the way is basically what Job's friends said to him.

Listen to these words from writer Dan Edelin- "Many American Christians believe failure results from something the failing person DID. Yet if we claim to be people who truly live by grace, acknowledging that we did nothing to deserve the benefits of grace, why then do we approach failure with a morbid works righteousness?... The Gospel we're so ready to trumpet in good times suddenly gets turned on its head, and grace goes out the window. Think about it. Our business failed because we didn't pray hard enough. We need to pray more. We got a chronic illness because we didn't read the Bible enough. We need to read the Bible more. We lost our home because we didn't tithe enough. We need to tithe even more. Yet blessing was all of grace and not because of anything we've done? Curious dichotomy, isn't it? Sadly, we only like one side of the coin when it comes to God's sovereignty."

We need to re-think our attitudes toward suffering and failure. We also need to re-think our attitudes on why we're part of the church. Do we only come to get blessing? Will we take suffering? Nowhere in the Bible are we guaranteed to have a victorious outward Christian life. We can be victorious, joyous in our hearts and attitudes- but we are not guaranteed health or wealth. All of these died being convinced that they were *not having their best life now!* Why? Because their best life awaited them. They were convinced that anything they lost now would be given back to them in the future.

### *Just Faith*

There is a name in this list that stopped me in my tracks when I really read it for the first time. *Samson*. Huh? The guy who shamed his parents, who was arrogant, who went to prostitutes and married a foreign wife? That Samson. Yep, the preacher says, that Samson.

Samson had 'just faith', not really many works or good virtues to accompany it- maybe at the end of his life he acted on faith, but overall he was a scoundrel. God worked in spite of Samson! What's with his being in that list? I'm more likely to put him in the list with the scoundrels of the Old Testament, not the saints.

Samson shows that some faith is not obvious, that God really does love sinners, that this whole thing is more about a gift of God than our goodness. If you're not feeling very good about yourself, not very spiritual- *take heart!* God doesn't grade His people on works, but on grace.

There is a song that all of you know that's always troubled me. It goes, "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better watch out I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town... He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake." That may be how Santa works, but it's not the way that Jesus works! It's not how God motivates us! If we were rewarded on how good or bad we were, none of us would measure up! We would all get coal in our stockings! We deserve nothing, that's why it's grace.

That's the scandal of faith- that it's all God's work, based on Christ's work in life and death. None of the people in this chapter are commended for their goodness (quite a few are pretty big mess-ups!), they are commended for their faith- which is a gift from God. That's what Christmas faith is- remembering that your relationship with God and your future home with Christ is the greatest gift you've ever been given.

### *I Last Thing*

Knowing the stories is not enough. Even becoming like the people in the stories is not enough. I remember an old Rich Mullins' song "Boy Like Me, Man Like You" where Rich sings, "did they tell you stories about the saints of old, stories about their faith, they say stories like that make a boy grow bold, stories like that make a man walk straight."

Stories of others may help you act better, but they're useless if they leave you at the person. They're only good if they lead you to the person of Jesus. They should lead us to stand before Him and see how we totally fail to measure up to Him, but how much He totally loves and accepts us and empowers us to really live. Then, only then, will our faith be real. That's Christmas faith- getting past all the stories of everyone else and coming to meet Jesus in faith.

Some of the resources I used in this series on Hebrews were *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* by Bill Lane, *NIV Application Commentary* by George Guthrie, *Hebrews* by Phillip Edgecumbe Hughes, *Themes in Hebrews* by Geerhardus Vos, classroom lectures by Dr. Bob Cara and Dr. Dan Doriani, sermons by Dr. Tim Keller, Douglas Wilson, and John Piper, and various other random thoughts and quotes by C.S. Lewis and many others. The reader should assume that little, if any, of this material is original.