

FAITH - 7: JUDGES

Hebrews 11:32-34

32 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Introduction: running out of time.

I've discovered a new way for preachers to end long sermons. It's Hebrews 11:32.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me...

The writer of Hebrews 11 has reached a place where he knows he is going to have to speed up and get to his conclusion. There are still more stories to tell, but time is against him. So he gives a few more names and makes a few general statements to sum up what happened when these people believed God.

Today I want to take the first 4 names from the verses we read: Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah. All four come from the book of Judges. Two of the names are quite well known - as are their stories; two of them, and their stories are less familiar. Gideon - well known, and Barak - less well known. Samson - probably the best known of all the judges, and Jephthah. All four are here in this chapter because they were men of faith.

We are focussing on these four characters this morning, but before we get to some of the detail of their lives and their faith, I want to remind us of the big picture. I don't want to get into the details of Samson and Gideon and the others and forget why they are in this chapter and what this chapter is about.

God has always called people to trust him and their faith has always paid off.

That's what Hebrews 11 is about. That's the big picture of the chapter. It's not just a collection of names. It's the story of a whole line-up of characters who have trusted God.

- Abel's faith led him to bring an acceptable sacrifice of worship to God.
- Enoch trusted God as he walked with him.
- Noah believed God and built a boat.
- Abraham's faith was tested at various points in his life: he believed God and obeyed him.
- Sarah (eventually) believed God's promise about having a son.
- Isaac, Jacob and Joseph all believed that God would give their people a future.
- Moses lived a life of faith.
- Joshua trusted God to bring down the walls of Jericho.
- Rahab, a pagan prostitute, believed that the Lord was God and entrusted herself to him.

The Bible is a story of people who trusted God. And their individual stories are there, the stories of how their faith lasted and overcame obstacles, so that the people who follow centuries later are encouraged to keep on believing.

That's what chapter 11 is here for. It is saying, "Don't give up your faith." That's what it was saying to its first century readers who were sorely tempted to turn back to where they had been and what they had known before. And that's what it says to us. God is looking for people to trust him.

There were still people who trusted God, even in chaotic times when there was no spiritual direction.

He needed people to trust him in the book of Judges, where we find the four stories we are looking at today.

In terms of the history of the Old Testament, the book of Judges covers a period of perhaps 300 years between the time of Joshua and the time of Samuel and the first of the kings. It was a fairly disastrous time for Israel. There was a lack of good, overall leadership and people tended to do their own thing and live by their own rules. Instead of strengthening their place in the Promised Land of Canaan, there were pockets of resistance that never got dealt with. Spiritually they turned away from the Lord and worshiped idols.

The book goes in cycles. There are six main cycles that talk about the people's spiritual unfaithfulness, leading to a time when God allowed them to be oppressed by some of the local nations, which in turn led to a time when the people cried out to God for help and he answered by raising up a leader (a judge) who rescued them. There would be a period of rest and then it started all over again.

There is a phrase that occurs four times in the last few chapters of the book:

In those days there was no king in Israel.

Twice it is followed by this:

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

It was a time of chaos. You probably would not have chosen to live in Israel during much of that time. It wasn't all bad, though: it was during this time that the story of Ruth took place and that was quite a contrast from the general tone.

But even though it was a time of chaos, God still found people of faith. He still found people who trusted him and whom he was able to use to do great things.

There is an important general lesson for us there too. God is always looking for people to trust him, even in times of spiritual chaos. And it is still possible to find people who trust God even at times like that.

Judges tells the stories of people who trusted and obeyed God during chaotic times.

The people who trusted God were far from perfect: but they saw God work as they trusted him.

Hebrews 11 highlights four of them. These four men were associated with four of the cycles we talked about a moment ago.

I need to tell you that all is not as it seems with these men. If all you had to go on was the fact they are mentioned in Hebrews 11, you might assume that they were great, pretty much flawless men. You could easily come to the conclusion that these were four heroes of

faith who stood head and shoulders above everyone else in the book of Judges and, in fact, in most of the Old Testament.

Listen again to the way they are mentioned in Hebrews 11:

... Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—
33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained
promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped
the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in
war, put foreign armies to flight.

There they are, taking their place alongside great people who achieved amazing things. Heroes. Heroes of faith.

In a sense they were heroes, but that doesn't tell the whole story about them. There are enough issues in their lives, and significant issues at that, to make you wonder whether they should deserve to be in a chapter of the Bible like this. If you like your heroes to be polished and perfect, these men are not for you.

When you look closer, you find a colourless man who appears for a while, then disappears and doesn't even get the privilege of finishing off his opponent. You find a nervous man from an insignificant background who needed a great deal of assurance from God before he would act: and he finished his life badly. You find a rough diamond, a man with leadership ability who ruins his moment of victory through his recklessness. And you find a deeply flawed man who is driven by his senses and his lust. But God singled them out, they trusted him and he used them to achieve great purposes.

You don't need to be perfect to trust God.

Let's take a look at these men. We'll take them in the order of Hebrews 11, though they come in a different sequence in Judges. We won't touch all of the details of their stories: hopefully enough to encourage us to trust God.

Gideon.

Gideon is probably the second best known of the judges, after Samson. His story runs from the beginning of chapter 6 to the end of chapter 9.

The fact that he appears in Hebrews 11 means that he trusted God. He was a man of faith. There are two main incidents where he trusted God. The first was early on, when he chopped down his father's pagan altar, his altar to Baal. And the second was his major achievement when he defeated the army of the Midianites with only 300 men.

But it all started very cautiously. In Judges 6 he was beating out wheat in a winepress so that the Midianites wouldn't find him. The tactics of Midian had been to oppress the Israelites by destroying their crops. As Gideon was beating out his wheat the angel of the Lord met him with these words:

The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valour.

That was a surprising message on two counts. (Or three if you add in the fact that an angel was speaking to him). At this point in his life Gideon was far from what you would call a mighty man of valour. But that's what the angel called him. And, as Gideon pointed out to the angel, if the Lord was with him then why were they in the state they were in? Gideon knew the great stories from history. This was very different and the Lord seemed to be very far away.

Some of you identify with that. All I would say is don't give up. What unfolds in Gideon's story follows on from the people crying out to God because of their trouble.

God had come to send Gideon to save his nation from their oppressors. All that Gideon could think about were the things that made him an unlikely candidate. He came from an insignificant family and he was the least in his father's house. But he was the man that God had chosen.

That becomes a significant theme in his story. One of the best known parts is where he heads out with an army of over 30,000 soldiers to fight Midian. Through stages God reduces that to an army of 300. Why? So that by the end of the story the Israelites would realise that God had saved them and they hadn't saved themselves.

I want to come back to that in a moment, but first let's go back to the earlier part of the story. Before God sends Gideon to battle, he asks him to deal with his father's idol shrines. Gideon's father should not have had these. There was an altar to Baal and there were wooden poles for use in the worship of the goddess Asherah. God told him to pull them down and build an altar to him in their place.

Here is what happened:

So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

That also sums up an important aspect of how God worked in Gideon's life. Gideon was fearful. He would rather have run away. His obedience was almost done in a corner, but he obeyed. As a result his father stood up to be counted and shortly after that the Spirit of God came upon him and the people rallied to him to fight their oppressors.

Before he led the army, he led his family. He did it by means of stumbling obedience.

God may be asking you to do something fairly small. It's small in the sense that not many people will ever know about it. Perhaps it's about taking a stand in your family or among a small group of people that you work with. You are afraid. Gideon's story is here to encourage you. You don't need to wait until you feel brave before you obey God. God will honour even stumbling obedience.

We are at a time of year when new schools beckon; a new set of classmates; the start of university. Maybe God is putting some kind of challenge before you because he wants you to show that he is the Lord. Who knows what impact your stumbling, even fear-filled obedience will have on other people who actually should know better, but they need someone like you to take a lead?

So Gideon obeyed God, but with fear in his heart. And that doubt and uncertainty stayed with him for a while longer. The end of chapter 6 has the famous story of his fleece. Just before the battle with Midian God allows him the opportunity to overhear some nervous Midianites who have just discovered in a dream that he is going to finish them off. His faith was hesitant and needed a lot of reassurance. But God was very gracious and gave him all that he asked for, and even more.

At the end of chapter 7 Gideon and his 300 men, armed with jars and torches and trumpets deal a fatal blow to the camp of Midian.

If the writer of Hebrews 11 had had a bit more time, he probably would have written, "By faith the camp of Midian was destroyed and the Midianites were put to flight."

God is fond of using the weak to bring down the strong. If he can take a Gideon who would rather hide in the shadows and use him to bring down the army of Midian, and if he can do it with less than 10% of the original army, then people are more likely to attribute the victory to him.

In the New Testament Paul talks about Christians who are serving God through the gospel as being like jars of clay that contain a wonderful treasure. The point is that people realise that the power comes from God.

Faith is not all about an army of strong people without questions and without doubts marching out to make a name for themselves. It's about insignificant people who sometimes need a lot of assurance trusting a big God to do what he has promised.

Barak.

Barak's story actually comes before Gideon's: you read about him in Judges 4 and 5.

He lived during the cycle of oppression at the hands of the Canaanites. Their king was Jabin and his military leader was Sisera. His army was well equipped with 900 iron chariots and for 20 years they oppressed the Israelites.

If you know anything at all about Barak and his story, you probably know that, depending on exactly how you read his story, he looks like he may have been a bit of a wimp. Let me explain.

The judge of the nation at this time was a woman called Deborah. It wasn't a man, it was a woman. Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth. It might be a good moment to draw our attention to the fact that some missions' experts estimate that nearly 2/3 of the missionary workforce today is women. Does that have anything to do with Deborah? I don't know, but you and I should be aware of it, especially if we are men.

Deborah was like a mother to the people. She was a prophetess and it was through her that God's message came to Barak that he was to gather an army of 10,000 and God would give Sisera into his hand.

Barak's answer was,

If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.

Deborah's reply:

I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.

Barak leads the army to victory, Sisera escapes and takes shelter in the tent of a woman called Jael who gives him milk to drink and when he falls asleep she hammers a tent peg through the side of his head!

So was Barak a wimp? "I'll go as long as you go with me, but I won't go on my own." At first glance it looks like it. It looks as though he was unwilling to go to battle unless he had Deborah holding his hand.

But some people think we are too hard on him. Deborah was the voice of God in this situation: Barak would only go to battle if he knew that the person God had appointed would go with him. He didn't care who got the credit for the battle in the end.

What do you think? I think I might just sit on the fence. I think the reason that Jael got to deliver the decisive blow instead of Barak may have been because Barak had been too hesitant. But then I see him getting a good mention in the song of chapter 5. And Hebrews 11 says that he was a man of faith.

Either way, you have a man who appears from nowhere, really, believes God enough to do what is asked of him, whether or not he's going to get any personal reward for it, and then he disappears again.

Could that be you? You are not called to be a big leader over a length of time. There is just one thing God is asking of you and he wants to know if you will trust him and obey.

Samson.

And then there is Samson. He's the best known of the judges, probably by quite some distance. He has four chapters devoted to his story. We get to read quite a few incidents from his life. His life is a graphic illustration of the fact that the presence of spiritual power is not always an indicator of spiritual character. The Spirit of God was very active in Samson's life, yet he was a man whose primary motivations seemed to be his own lusts and his own wants.

There is a very important principle: the presence of spiritual power is not always an indicator of spiritual character. The most sobering part of it is that the absence of spiritual character can eventually bring an end to useful work.

Samson's story is the story of a man who pressed the self-destruct button on his life. He is the George Best of the Bible: huge ability and potential destroyed by deep flaws and weakness.

He never took steps to guard against his weaknesses. Someone has described him as a he-man with a she-weakness. There are four women in his story. There is his mother, there is his Philistine wife (whose name we don't know), there is a nameless prostitute in Gaza, and there is Delilah, the woman who eventually brings him down.

There is no surprise when Delilah brings him down. You get a clue about what's likely to happen in the story of his Philistine wife. He sets a riddle for some of the guests at the wedding. They can't solve it. Eventually they threaten his wife and she starts to put pressure on him. "You don't love me," she says. The text says that she pressed him hard. Until he gave in and told her.

What happens with Delilah? Tell me the secret of your strength. When he doesn't tell her, she says, "How can you say 'I love you'?" And the text says that she pressed him hard with her words day after day until he gave in and told her his secret. It was almost like watching a replay. If you want something from Samson, find a woman he likes and get her to work on him until he gives in.

He never dealt with his weakness and he didn't safeguard the secret of his strength. Not cutting his hair was just one part of the special vow that he was meant to keep through his life: the Nazirite vow. He was also to stay away from the fruit of the vine and he was not to touch a dead body. By the time Delilah got to him he had clearly violated the part of the vow about the dead body and by implication had broken the part about the fruit of the vine. His long hair was all that was left: and he let it go.

I think the saddest verse in his story is Judges 16:20 (final part).

But he did not know that the Lord had left him.

And the most hopeful, grace-filled verse is verse 22:

But the hair of his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.

So it was that a deeply chastened Samson prayed to God for new strength as he stood between the two middle pillars of a Philistine temple. He pulled down the pillars and as he died, thousands of Philistines, including their leaders, perished with him.

Even his prayer was flawed: he called out to God twice in his story and both times were essentially selfish prayers. But do you know what? He goes down as a man of faith.

He was a desperate man, a deeply flawed man, but when he leaned on God and he had nowhere else to go, God answered him and he accomplished something significant.

These are not straightforward stories. These are not polished heroes. But even though they lived in chaotic times and even though their own lives were filled with weakness and confusion and compromise, they still had their moments when they trusted God and God rewarded their faith.

I'm not telling you to go and live like Samson in the way he abused God's grace: but I can tell you to imitate Samson's faith.

Jephthah.

And what about Jephthah? It's a pretty troubling story. The background to the story is in the second half of chapter 10 and his story runs through to chapter 12.

Jephthah was a rough diamond of a man. His mother was a prostitute and his half-brothers rejected him. He served as a magnet to a crowd of what the Bible describes as "worthless fellows."

When the Ammonites start to fight against Israel - their king was trying to settle an old dispute - some of the leaders turn to Jephthah to help them. He agrees. His first tactic is to try diplomacy but when that doesn't work, the Spirit of the Lord comes on him and he routs Ammon.

But here is his problem. Here is what it says in Judges 11:

30 And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, 31 then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."

The Lord kept his vow and Jephthah won his battle. Guess what came out of his house to meet him? Actually, who, rather than what. It was his daughter, his only child. She came to meet him, dancing with tambourines. And Jephthah had made this terrible vow.

There was a provision in Leviticus 5 for anyone who had made a rash vow. Did Jephthah not know about it? Did it not apply? Tragically he decided that he had to keep his vow and sacrifice his daughter.

Some people have suggested that he didn't actually sacrifice her as a burnt offering: she would live her life without ever marrying and having children. So Jephthah's family line would come to an end.

If that's true, then it softens the blow. But if he actually sacrificed her, I think it's a sign of how far things had fallen in Israel when even a man who was used as a leader was so deeply flawed and spoke and acted so recklessly.

Yet he was a man of faith. For all his rashness and imperfection, he looked to God to give him victory. He knew that he couldn't win on his own.

Conclusion: the faith of flawed people.

So now that you know all that, are you surprised that these men get a mention in Hebrews 11? The writer has no hesitation in including them. Even imperfect people can trust God. Even in chaotic times. You don't have to be perfect to trust God.

But I want to finish this more positively.

The book of Judges is the story of the search for a leader. Moses is gone, Joshua is gone. Who is going to stand up and be a godly leader for these people? Not Barak. Hopefully not Gideon: we didn't say much about the idolatry that marked the end of his life. Hardly Jephthah. Certainly not Samson. In fact when you get to the end of the book, the final statement that there was no king and everyone did what was right in his own eyes is an indictment of that whole period. It didn't work. So you flick on in the Old Testament and you get the stories of the kings. There were some good ones, but even men like David and Solomon were flawed and the whole period ends with the people in exile.

Where will we find a godly leader that we can follow and look to with total confidence?

His name is Jesus. Here is the start of chapter 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.