

FAITH - 10: FAITH FOR ALL SEASONS.

Hebrews 11:32-40.

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. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection.

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Introduction: a faith for all seasons.

Last week, on the same morning, two ladies from our church were in operating theatres in two different hospitals. It wasn't just the location of the hospitals that was different: the nature of their surgeries was very different too. For one of them it was a delicate cancer-related operation. For the other it was a Caesarean section. For one of the ladies - and her family - there was the uncertainty of what the outcome would be; for the other - and her husband - there was the anticipation of getting to hold their twin sons.

Life is like that. It has ways of throwing contrasting experiences together.

The Bible is like that too. You need look no further than the Psalms. The same collection of ancient praise songs gives us Psalm 23 with its promise of rest and hope and it gives us Psalm 88, possibly the blackest of all the Psalms which ends without a glimmer of hope and the words,

my companions have become darkness.

God is a God for all seasons. This morning I want to show how Hebrews 11 presents us with a faith for all seasons.

For the fourth week in a row we've read how the writer has been running out of time. We've been able to take more time than he seems to have had and we've looked at some of the stories to which he has been able to give only the briefest mention.

Notice three things about his summary from verse 32 to 40.

- There are stories with positive endings (32-25).
- There are stories with negative endings (35b-38).
- None of the stories has a final ending (39-40).

Stories with positive endings.

Look again at verse 32.

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. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection.

Verse 32 lists some people whom we have looked at in the past few weeks before verses 33-35 group together a list of achievements. Here is a list of things that were accomplished by people who trusted God.

Faith affects different kinds of outcomes.

Sometimes faith affects national outcomes.

There were people who conquered kingdoms. You can think of the people in the book of Judges who fought battles against hostile peoples. Or think of David and his military conquests. It was through faith that these leaders saw their nation take shape and they saw it overcome obstacles. Foreign armies were put to flight.

And it wasn't just about conquest. There were people who enforced justice. Think of David and Samuel who provided righteous and fair leadership to their nation. Their nation did not just need to grow: it needed to be led with justice.

Some of the mentions of the outcomes of faith have to do with national outcomes.

Sometimes faith affects personal outcomes.

Notice that it was by faith that some of the people listed obtained promises.

A few weeks ago we thought of David in relation to this. There was a significant gap between the time when he received the promise that he would one day be king and the day he actually became king. For much of that time he was on the run as Saul tried to get rid of him. He waited. He refused to take things into his own hands and grab hold of the kingdom in an unrighteous way. He trusted God to bring it about in his time and his way.

Sometimes faith affects natural outcomes.

And there were times that faith affected natural outcomes.

The lions were expected to maul Daniel. God shut their mouths. The fiery furnace was meant to burn Daniel's three friends to a cinder. They didn't.

Beyond that there were people who overcome weakness and were made strong. This may be talking about people like Gideon, who started out as a very timid, unlikely warrior and God used him. Or it may be talking about people who were weak physically, they were ill, and who were made strong again. People like King Hezekiah who was miraculously healed. In answer to his prayer, God added 15 years to his life.

And there were women who received back their dead by resurrection. Think about the ministries of the two prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Both of them were involved in the resurrection of a boy who had died. In the case of Elijah it was the son of a poor widow; in the case of Elisha it was the son of a wealthy woman.

Under the ministries of these prophets, the course of nature was reversed: death was turned back.

When RT Kendall reflects on this section in his book on Hebrews 11 he comments that “faith refuses to accept the inevitable.” (I’m grateful for Kendall’s inspiration for the summary above).

Faith refuses to accept the inevitable.

- David didn’t accept the inevitability that Goliath would hold Israel to ransom.
- And he didn’t accept the inevitability that he would need to take the law into his own hands if he was going to experience the promise of being king.
- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn’t accept the inevitability that flames would burn them to a crisp.
- Elijah’s faith did not accept the inevitability that death has the final word.

Think about this: if faith affected those different kinds of outcomes in Old Testament times, why would it be different today? Can faith still affect national outcomes in 2009? Can faith still affect personal outcomes in 2009? Can faith still affect natural outcomes in 2009?

Let’s take a minute to think about this from a slightly different angle. Has God changed since then?

Do we believe that God is still sovereign over the business of nations?

There is a bit of a difference between David and you. David was king of a nation that God had chosen over against other nations. You are not; nor can Ireland or Britain lay claim to being God’s chosen people.

But is God not sovereign over the nations?

Why else would the NT tell us to pray for rulers and governments? What would be the point of that if God was no longer sovereign over the nations. The nations are a drop in the bucket to God. God is able to raise up a Gentile king and say, “You are my servant.” It is God who determines the rise and fall of nations. He is sovereign over the places where they live.

If we believe all this - and it is what the Bible teaches - what difference should it be making? What should we be doing about praying for our own nation and its government?

And what should we be doing about praying for other nations around the world, particularly nations where the church is persecuted?

Do we believe that he still rules over the personal circumstances of his people?

Do you believe that he is interested in your life, your gifts, your opportunities, your circumstances and your future? He is. He is committed to getting his people safely home and his desire is to make us useful on the journey.

In the knowledge of that, are you more likely to trust God for the unlikely, or are you more likely to settle for the apparently inevitable? Is your life more about moving towards what God wants you to be or is it more about allowing something else to define and limit you.

Just recently Pauline and I were talking about some circumstances that have probably influenced the way I sometimes think. “It may be a reason,” she said, “but it’s not an excuse.”

Does God still rule over the personal circumstances of his people? Can faith make a difference in terms of personal outcomes?

Do we believe that he is still able to affect the outcomes of the course of nature?

Do we believe that he can still reverse the course of nature? Can he heal people?

Faith refuses to accept the inevitable.

So far it is challenging and encouraging, but the tone changes quite dramatically in the middle of verse 35 and we start to read about stories that had negative outcomes. Faith doesn't always result in great reversals.

Stories with negative endings.

I think verse 35 is probably one of those places in the Bible where the people who decided on the break between verses (and chapters) got it wrong. There is really a new paragraph in the middle of verse 35.

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Some people saw amazing reversals happen as they trusted God and refused to accept the inevitable; others were tortured. Still others were mocked and flogged. Some were murdered in the most brutal ways.

Here is a question: did this second group of people believe God any less than the people who were delivered? Did the people who were delivered have a greater quality of faith than the people who were martyred? Were the people who escaped the edge of the sword a stronger, more faithful believers than the people who were killed by the sword. Some escaped and some fell. Was the difference in the amount or quality of their faith?

I see no hint of that in the chapter. There is no suggestion that the faith that enabled people to escape the edge of the sword was in any way superior to the faith that enabled people to die by the sword.

Elijah escaped from Jezebel; there were other prophets, whom she killed.

In the book of Acts, James was killed while Peter escaped from prison. Are we meant to think that Peter was a worse person than James? Or that James didn't trust Jesus enough? The book of Acts never says that.

Before we look at some of the lessons from these verses, can I urge you to make sure that you never assume that trouble in someone's life means that they are lacking in faith. A lot of damage is done by people who don't have an adequate theology of suffering.

The first readers of this letter needed this section. Their temptation was to abandon their trust in Jesus. The stories of all the wonderful things that faith accomplished were certainly inspiring, but what about the things that were happening to them? If they believed sufficiently would the persecution end? If their faith was strong enough, would their opponents leave them alone?

They needed to see that faith didn't always lead to a positive outcome.

Notice some lessons that emerge from these stories with negative endings.

People of faith refuse to accept the inevitable but they continue to trust God in the unexplainable.

It's this that sums up what this passage is about. Faith doesn't give up when it doesn't see a positive outcome.

Last week we talked about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They were given the choice of worshiping the king's statue or being thrown to the flames. In Nebuchadnezzar's mind there was no god who would be able to rescue them. The three men knew that they didn't

need to argue: the God they served was able to rescue them. But even if he didn't, they would still refuse to bow to the statue.

Their trust in God went beyond the need to have a guaranteed outcome. "Even if he doesn't rescue us, we still will not worship these other gods." That was the total surrender of faith. They refused to accept the inevitable: their faith said that there was no guarantee that the flames would burn them. But they were ready to trust God no matter what.

I think about Paul in relation to this. No one knows for sure the specific nature of his thorn in the flesh. It was some way the devil got at him to weaken him and discourage him. Paul wanted God to take it away. He prayed that he would. But God said no. Why was that? Was it because Paul didn't have enough faith? Or because he didn't approach the problem in the right way? Don't be surprised if some preachers tell you that's what happened. But it has nothing to do with it. We know that it has nothing to do with it because God spoke to Paul and gave him the reason that the thorn would stay.

God told him it was good for him. Even though it was a messenger of Satan, something that the devil wanted to use to discourage and weaken Paul. In God's eyes Paul was better with it than without it. When he was weak, then he was strong, because God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

Faith refuses to accept the inevitable, but it still keeps trusting even in the unexplainable.

People of faith believe that faithfulness is more important than popularity.

There were OT prophets who experienced a great deal of what is talked about in these verses. There is a tradition that the reference to being sawn in two had to do with Isaiah.

You can think of Elijah whose ministry was not just marked by great power, particularly in the confrontation with the prophets of Baal, but who had to run from the anger of the queen. Jezebel killed many prophets. Others were hidden in a cave. By faith these people suffered as fugitives.

It was their faithfulness to God that got them in trouble.

Think about the prophet Jeremiah. People regarded him as a messenger of doom and gloom. He said that the city of Jerusalem was going to fall. There was no hope in staying in the city to defend it against the Babylonian armies that were besieging it. Better go out and surrender.

People regarded that as disloyalty. What a discouragement to the soldiers. It would be like the coach of a team telling his players not to bother turning up because they were sure to be beaten. So they lowered him into a muddy cistern. He had already been in a dungeon in the previous chapter, and now it was a cistern where he sank in the mud.

It would have been much easier in one way for Jeremiah to give the people a different message. Tell them what they wanted to hear. Tell them that God was going to rout the Babylonians. Tell them to be strong and to fight and everything would work out well. That would have encouraged the soldiers. That would have made Jeremiah a popular man. If only he had played down the idea that God was displeased and was going to judge the city, they could have left him alone.

But faithfulness was more important to Jeremiah than popularity. He had to be faithful to God who sent him. He had to tell the truth, even when the truth was unpopular.

It's not popular to talk about what's right and what's wrong. It's not popular to say that any particular belief system may be wrong, or that a particular lifestyle may be wrong.

I know that sometimes we can be obnoxious in the way we talk and the way we condemn. We talked about this from the life of Daniel last Sunday night. But there will be times when

being faithful makes us unpopular. Don't make unpopularity your goal. But know that people of faith believe that being faithful is more important than being liked.

People of faith believe that physical death does not have the final word.

Look back at the second half of verse 35.

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

That translation doesn't quite get it. The verse actually talks about them obtaining a better resurrection. It's an important detail when you remember the first half of verse 35.

Women received back their dead by resurrection.

In other words there are OT stories of resurrection. They are great examples of the outcomes of faith. But there is a better resurrection than the resurrections that were brought about in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

I take it that the young men who were restored to their mothers by Elijah and Elisha eventually died again. A resurrection where you rise and won't die again is a better resurrection than that. That is what these people were looking for. They were ready to let this life go because of the hope of a life that would never end.

About two centuries before this letter - right in the middle of the time between the OT and NT, there was a wave of persecution against the Jews. The Temple in Jerusalem was turned into a pagan shrine and the Jews were not allowed to practice their traditional way of life.

There is a story, told in the book of 2 Macabees (not actually in the Bible), of 7 brothers and their mother who were tortured in an attempt to make them eat pork. One by one they were viciously tortured but refused to give in.

They scalped the first brother and gave him the choice of eating pork or being tortured. When he refused, they tortured him. As he was about to die he said:

"You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever. It is for his laws that we are dying."

Perhaps it was these people the writer was thinking about.

Why can a martyr accept his death? Because of his confidence that he will be raised again in a better resurrection.

These people of faith believed that this life is not all there is. If they had believed that this life is all that there is, that there is no God who transcends everything, that there is no resurrection, that there is no reward, then it would have made no sense to be tortured without accepting the possibility of release.

Even if we are not talking about martyrdom, the same truth remains: physical death does not have the final word. We will rise again, just as Jesus did.

Faith makes its decisions based on that truth.

All the stories are open-ended.

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

What does this mean? It means that none of these stories has a final ending. All these OT characters were commended through their faith: they were approved by God as they trusted him. But they never got to take possession of the ultimate fulfillment of what God had promised them.

Why?

They are waiting for us to be ready to join them. There is something better than anything they already experienced. Think of that. There will be something better for David than taking down Goliath. There will be something better for Moses than crossing the Red Sea.

Better is quite an important word in the letter to Hebrews. It talks about a better covenant, a better hope, better promises and a better sacrifice. The original readers needed to know that because they were tempted to go back. "Don't go back," he says, Jesus has brought a better way.

We're not quite there yet either. But we will be made perfect. And there will be a kingdom that can never be shaken.

In the meantime, there will still be parts of the church across the world that face persecution. There will still be prayers that are not answered the way we would long for. There will still be funerals.

But there is hope. And faith is the assurance of what we hope for: that's where this chapter started.

Conclusion.

As you look around at people of faith you will see some who are rejoicing and some who are suffering. You will see some whose faith is changing their circumstances. You will see others who are enduring their circumstances without running away, or turning their back on God because they know that at the end of the day, the future is in his hands.

Faith refuses to settle for the inevitable; but it also goes on trusting through the unexplainable.