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FAITH'S REWARD

Hebrews 11:32-40

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Hebrews Lesson 43

Faith's Reward
Hebrews 11:32-40

In 1987, Marla and I went to the Far East, where I spoke to some people who were teaching English in China. We took a side trip to Macao, which had not yet gone back under Chinese rule, to visit some missionary friends. Through an interpreter, we chatted with two brave young Chinese women, who each week risked imprisonment or worse by traveling into China for ministry purposes.

I asked them if they had ever heard of a false teaching that has plagued American churches, called "the health and wealth" gospel. It is the teaching that it is God's will for His children to be healed of every disease and to be rich. If you lack these things, it is because of your lack of faith. One of the women laughed softly when she heard this, shook her head and said, "No, I don't think that Chinese Christians would believe that!" Chinese Christians know that following Jesus Christ is more likely the path to hardship and persecution than to health and wealth.

The current *The Voice of the Martyrs* magazine (Nov., 2004) has an article on a 34-year-old Chinese woman who was arrested in June for distributing Bibles and gospel tracts. The authorities kicked her, tore out some of her hair, and beat her to death. They reported that she died of a "sudden disease." She joined the company of many of those chronicled in our text.

The author of Hebrews sounds like a preacher with his eye on the clock. He could say far more, if time allowed. But instead, he simply lists a few names without comment and then describes the experiences of others, without naming them. Some won great victories by faith. Others suffered horrible torture and death by faith. While all of them gained approval (or, testimony; our word *martyr* comes from the Greek word) by their faith, they did not receive the promise that we have received. The author is trying to steel his readers to be faithful to Christ in the face of looming persecution. His message is much needed because of the human tendency to use faith in Christ as the means to personal comfort and happiness. But when trials come, faith is abandoned. His message is that...

Faith trusts God in spite of results,
looking to the final reward.

The text falls into three sections. In 11:32-35a, he shows how sometimes God blesses those who trust Him with spectacular results. But without even catching his breath, in the middle of verse 35 he shifts direction to show (11:35b-38) that sometimes God blesses those who trust Him with the grace to endure horrible persecution without wavering. He concludes (11:39-40) by showing that God will bless all who trust Him with eternal rewards.

1. Sometimes God blesses those who trust Him with spectacular results (11:32-35a).

Time would fail *me* if I went into detail on every person listed here, so I will summarize this section under two points:

- A. Faith enables flawed people to accomplish great things for God.

The author (11:32 tells us that he was a man, since “me” is qualified by a masculine participle in Greek) lists four men from the period of the Judges, followed by David, Samuel, and the prophets. He does not list them in chronological order, in that Gideon followed Barak, Samson followed Jephthah, and David followed Samuel. No one knows why he chose this order; perhaps he was just rattling off the names spontaneously.

The interesting thing is that the first five men all had some serious shortcomings, but in spite of these flaws, God honored their faith. Gideon at first was cowardly and had to be coaxed to do what God called him to do. After his amazing victory with 300 men over the Midianite army of 135,000, he made an ephod that lured Israel into idolatry (Judges 8:24-27). Yet in spite of his failures, the author names him as a hero of faith.

Barak won a great victory for Israel over an army that had 900 chariots, but he only did it at the prodding of a woman, Deborah. Samson routed the Philistines on numerous occasions, yet he was tripped up by his lust for foreign women. Jephthah, the son of a harlot, was at first driven away by his half-brothers. But later, the elders of his home town pled with him to return and lead them in battle against the enemy. He won a victory, but then made a rash vow to sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house when he

returned from battle. His only daughter came out to greet him, and he foolishly kept his stupid vow.

David was a man after God's heart, who had great faith even as a teenager, when he defeated Goliath. But he later committed adultery and then murder to cover his tracks. Even Samuel, although a godly man himself, failed to raise his sons to follow the Lord (1 Sam. 8:1-3). Samuel was regarded as the first of the prophets, and so the term covers everyone from his day down to Malachi. As a whole, they boldly spoke God's truth, and often suffered for it. But overall, put the men of verse 32 into a scale and it tips towards those who had glaring flaws. But in spite of these flaws, God used them because they trusted Him in some challenging situations.

We would apply this improperly if we shrugged off our sins and shortcomings as no big deal. We should be confronting our sins, growing in holiness and maturity. But this list should encourage us with the fact that God uses imperfect people who trust in Him. While we should never justify our sins, we don't have to wait until we are sinlessly perfect (which is never!) to serve the Lord.

This is one of the benefits of reading Christian biographies. If a biography is written well, it does not portray the person as if he or she walked on water. It lets you see the imperfections, immaturity, and blind spots of people who did great things for God because they trusted in Him.

William Carey, "the father of modern missions," had an illiterate wife who defiantly refused to go to India with him. He was going to go without her, but his departure was delayed by some problems. He and his traveling companion returned to his house, where his companion laid a guilt trip on Carey's wife. He warned her that if she didn't accompany them, her family "would be dispersed and divided forever—she would repent it as long as she lived" (Mary Drewery, *William Carey* [Zondervan], p. 52). She fearfully went with them, only to be bitterly unhappy and finally to go insane in India. Carey himself was an overly indulgent father who did not correct his children (Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* [Zondervan], p. 119). After seven years of labor in India, he could not claim a single Indian convert (*ibid.*, p. 117). Yet God used William Carey in an extraordinary way in spite of his faults.

B. Faith enables us to accomplish things that are explainable only by God's power.

By faith, the men listed and others who go unnamed, "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;..." (11:33-35a). The only "routine" things on the list are "performed acts of righteousness" (NIV = "administered justice") and "obtained promises" (depending on what those promises are). The rest of the list includes things that are quite impressive, if not totally miraculous.

But one thing on the list is common to everything accomplished by faith: "from weakness were made strong." Faith requires recognizing our weakness, but at the same time, laying hold of God's strength. As Jesus said (John 15:5), "... apart from Me you can do nothing." The apostle Paul, who on the surface seems to be a competent, powerful man, confessed (2 Cor. 3:5), "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." He further explained (2 Cor. 4:7), "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." That is why he taught that the Christian must walk by the Spirit, who produces His fruit in our lives (Gal. 5:16, 22-23).

Every Christian who has accomplished great things for God has known this truth as the very foundation of what they did. Robert Morrison, a pioneer missionary to China (we saw his grave in Macao), was asked, "Do you really expect to make an impact on that great land?" He replied, "No sir, but I expect God to" (source unknown). George Muller's biographer wrote of him, "Nothing is more marked in George Muller, to the very day of his death, than this, that he so looked to God and leaned on God that he felt himself to be nothing, and God everything" (A. T. Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol* [Revell], p. 112). Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to inland China, said, "All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them" (source unknown).

William Carey was a cobbler by trade. Most churchmen in his day believed that the Great Commission had been given only to the apostles, and thus they had no vision for “converting the heathen.” But Carey came to the revolutionary idea that foreign missions were the central responsibility of the church. He wrote a book promoting that thesis, and he spoke to a group of ministers, challenging them to the task of missions. In that talk, he made the now-famous statement, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God” (Tucker, p. 115).

The mission he established in India was plagued by huge problems, not the least of which was an associate who mismanaged mission funds and made many enemies because of unpaid debts. As mentioned, Carey had major family problems. Yet during his years in India, he translated the Bible into three languages, supervised and edited translations into 36 languages, produced a massive Bengali-English dictionary, pioneered social reform, planted churches, engaged in medical relief, founded the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India, founded a college and other schools, and served as professor of Sanskrit, Bengali, and Marathi (J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* [Zondervan], p. 192)! He was a weak cobbler made strong through faith in a mighty God.

What are you trusting God for right now that is beyond your comfort zone or human ability? Are you praying for God to do anything that, if He did it, there could be no human explanation for it? Faith always involves the risk of putting yourself into a situation where, if God does not come through, you will fail miserably. This is not to imply that we should be sloppy about preparation or planning. There is nothing spiritual about spontaneity. But it is to say that after all of our plans and preparation, we should be praying, “God, if You don’t work, this whole thing is going to be a colossal failure!” Like Peter stepping out of the boat onto the water, we should be very much aware that if He doesn’t hold us up, we’re going to drown! Pray with me that God would accomplish things through this church that can only be explained because He did it.

Before you launch out on something grandiose, like reaching the Arab world for Christ, start on the personal level. These heroes conquered kingdoms by faith—have you conquered your anger or

lust by God's power? These heroes "performed acts of righteousness," or "administered justice" by faith. Have you applied your faith to your daily job or routine, so that you reflect God's righteousness by your integrity and honesty? These heroes "obtained promises" by faith. Do you claim God's promises for the problems that you face in your personal and family life?

So the first part of the list teaches us that sometimes God blesses those who trust Him with spectacular results. Even though they are flawed people, God uses those who trust Him to accomplish things that are explainable only by His power. That part of our text is exciting. But we must keep reading:

2. Sometimes God blesses those who trust Him with the grace to endure horrible trials without wavering (11:35b-38).

"Women receiving back their dead by resurrection" is the apex of the spectacular. It doesn't get any more impressive than that! Yet without skipping a beat, the author continues (11:35b-38), "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 [this has weak manuscript support and may not be original], 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."

After reading the first part of the list, you want to say, "These guys on the second half of the list must *not* have had faith, right?" But the author continues (11:39), "And all these, having gained approval through their faith..." Those on the second half of the list were just as much people of faith as those on the first half! In fact, you could argue that they had greater faith, because it's not as easy to trust God when you're being scourged, stoned, or sawn in two as it is when you're seeing foreign armies put to flight and the dead raised to life. While all of us, if we could, would sign up to be in the first group, we need to recognize that sometimes God is pleased to withhold spectacular results and bless us instead with His grace as our sufficiency in overwhelming trials (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

With one exception, many names could fit into the various categories on this list of persecutions. That exception is “sawn in two,” which is not in the Bible. Tradition says that the wicked King Manasseh killed the prophet Isaiah by sawing him in two. A Jewish work, *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, recounts this terrible ordeal, saying, “Isaiah neither cried aloud nor wept, but his lips spoke with the Holy Spirit until he was sawn in two” (in Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 514).

The description of some being tortured, not accepting their release, may refer to two incidents during the reign of terror of the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes (reported in the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 6 & 7). In the first, an old teacher of the law, Eleazar, was forced to open his mouth to eat pork. But, “preferring an honourable death to an unclean life, he spat it out” (2 Macc. 6:19, *New English Bible*). They then stretched him on a rack and flogged him.

At one point, they offered that he could eat clean meat, but pretend that it was the pork that the king had ordered. He replied, “Send me quickly to my grave. If I went through with this pretence at my time of life, many of the young might believe that at the age of ninety Eleazar had turned apostate. If I practised deceit for the sake of a brief moment of life, I should lead them astray and bring stain and pollution on my old age. I might for the present avoid man’s punishment, but, alive or dead, I shall never escape from the hand of the Almighty” (6:24-27). In the other incident, seven sons of one woman were tortured and killed in front of her for refusing to eat pork.

Our text refutes the health and wealth heresy, to say the least! It shows us the fierce opposition that Satan has towards the faithful people of God. It reveals the irrational evil that consumes wicked people to inflict such atrocities on the godly. And, it should encourage us to endure rejection, ill-treatment, injustice, and even torture and death, if need be, for the sake of the gospel. Although, like the Hebrews (12:4), we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in our striving against sin, it may come to that. If we do suffer for the sake of Christ, we will join a great company of God’s people down through history “of whom the world was not worthy” (11:38).

The last two verses of the chapter show us that...

3. God will bless all who trust Him with eternal rewards (11:39-40).

“All these” refers to both groups. They all gained approval (or “a testimony”) through their faith, yet none received “the promise” (literal translation). Abraham received the promise of Isaac (11:17). Others “obtained promises” by faith (11:33). But none received *the promise*, which refers to Christ. They saw Him from afar in types and shadows, but we see Him clearly revealed in the New Testament. Most of them were under the old covenant, but God “provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.” That something better is the new covenant in Christ’s blood. The old covenant with its sacrifices could not make the worshipers perfect (10:1). But the new covenant has sanctified us “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10). The Old Testament saints were saved, but their salvation was not complete until the cross. Ours is complete because Jesus is the perfect sacrifice.

The author’s point is that if the Old Testament saints were faithful through all of these trials, even though they didn’t receive the promise of Christ in the flesh, how much more should we be faithful, since we have Christ! John Calvin (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], p. 308) put it, “A small spark of light led them to heaven; when the sun of righteousness shines over us, with what pretence can we excuse ourselves if we still cleave to the earth?”

Any yet, although we have the promise of Christ, we do not yet have the full experience of the glory that is to be revealed with Him in heaven. And so we must, like the Old Testament saints, live by faith in God’s promise as we await the final consummation when Jesus returns. We must endure whatever trials come, even persecution, by fixing our eyes on Jesus (12:1-3).

Conclusion

Let me sum up this section with four applications. I cannot expand on these, but I encourage you to think about how they apply more extensively to your life:

(1) *Faith is ready to sacrifice present comfort for future reward with Christ.* Faith recognizes that this life is very short in comparison with eternity. With Paul, faith recognizes that “momentary, light

affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). In Paul's case, this "light affliction" included beatings, imprisonments, being stoned, shipwrecked, and often being in danger of death (2 Cor. 11:23-27)! When you experience "light affliction," do you grumble or do you joyfully trust God?

(2) *Faith lives with a God-ward focus, not with a focus on people or things.* The saints mentioned in our text could endure mockings, scourgings, imprisonments, and death because their focus was on God, not on other people or things. They were looking to eternity, not to this vapor of life here. Calvin put it this way, "we ought to live only so as to live to God: as soon as we are not permitted to live to God, we ought willingly and not reluctantly to meet death" (*ibid.*, p. 306).

(3) *Faith trusts and obeys God, leaving the results to His sovereignty.* Some trust and obey God and He grants spectacular results. Others trust and obey the same mighty God and He enables them to endure horrific trials in His strength. The difference is not in the people or in their faith, but in God's sovereign purpose in each situation. We know the same God that these Old Testament saints knew, and we have even more, in that we know Christ personally. So we should trust Him as they did, whether He chooses to put us to death, as He did with the apostle James, or to deliver us from death for a while, as He did with Peter.

(4) *Faithfulness to Jesus Christ counts more than anything else, even than life itself.* As Martin Luther put it ("A Mighty Fortress"), "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still; His kingdom is forever." Trust God in whatever difficult situations you face. One day soon you will hear, "Well done, good and faithful slave.... Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 24:21)

Discussion Questions

1. Where is the balance between accepting our shortcomings and yet striving by faith to overcome them?
2. Why is faith not opposed to preparation, planning, and hard work? How can we know whether the power is from God or from our planning and effort?
3. Why is it wrong to judge whether we have God's blessing by the visible results? How can we know if we have His blessing?
4. What are some reasons that God does not always deliver those who trust in Him?

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