

Overcoming Obstacles Hebrews 11:29-31, 7/28/19 Steve Harden

“By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.” Hebrews 11:29-31.

The emerging of the cecropia moth from its cocoon is a really fascinating act of nature. You see, the moth may be several months in the cocoon, but it may take as much as 21 days for it to struggle itself free from the cocoon once it starts, and it's quite a struggle for that moth. Now it's easy for us if we were watching that struggle to say, “Hey, I'm going to help that moth get out of that cocoon. I can help,” and maybe snip that cocoon a little bit, kind of open it up, and make it a little easier for the moth to go through that cocoon. But if you did that, the moth will come out weak and its wings will be just crimped and shriveled and it will never, ever fly. For you see, in the struggle, in the wrestling to get out of that cocoon, it builds its muscle structure and it pushes the fluid in its body out to its wings, and it can only fly if it has wrestled with the obstacle of the cocoon. It's the only way it will be healthy and strong.

My friends, in much the same way, God uses adversity and obstacles in our lives to strengthen our faith. James says, it is in the testing of our faith, that develops perseverance. This morning, we are looking in chapter 11 of Hebrews, and we're going to look at three different people that faced enormous obstacles and adversities. They faced impossible situations, situations that naturally they could never come out on the other side. There is no hope of rescue or escape, and yet, in each circumstance, when they choose to trust and believe in the promises

of God, when they choose to trust the reality of what they cannot see, rather than being overcome by their obstacle, they are able to overcome their obstacle.

It's by their faith in the promises of God that they are able to overcome. And just like the moth, adversities and obstacles are the way that God strengthens our faith muscles so that our faith grows strong and we learn to trust Him. All of those impossible situations that we face, the ones that appear like there is no hope whatsoever, they are there to build our trust in Him. Look, can we be honest enough to say that we all face situations that tempt us to despair? If not now, in the future you will. There are obstacles that tempt us, and we feel like there is no hope, but let me encourage you today, beyond everything else, there is a reason for your obstacle. There is a reason for your adversity. And I believe that purpose is two-fold. First of all, to test and strengthen your faith, God is faithful to give you the obstacle so that your faith may grow strong. But secondly, so that He will be able to declare His strength among His people. So, it's to grow your faith, but also to show Himself strong. And every overwhelming obstacle will at least be for those two reasons.

Now, our passage this morning chronicles three impossible situations. These characters in these situations have the same feelings that you and I deal with: the mountains of fear and doubt and intense grief. We see that they are led to deal with these obstacles by faith in the promises of God, to conquer and overcome by trusting God that He means what He says, and He will fight for His people. We're going to see three seemingly overwhelming obstacles, we will see two lessons about faith, and then four implications about your faith, okay? So, three seemingly insurmountable obstacles, two lessons about faith, and then four implications about your faith.

So, first, three seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The first one I call 'between a rock and a hard place.' And that's the Hebrews by the Red Sea, verse 29: "By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned." Now, the obstacle for the Israelites was pretty obvious. It was a large body of water, and the Egyptian army was in the back; they were trapped between a rock and a hard place. You see, the pharaoh had consented to let the slaves go free, but no sooner then they were out of Egypt he changed his mind and started chasing them. And instead of Moses leading them through Philistia, straight out of Egypt, he led them to a dead-end right at the Red Sea. And so, they had the Red Sea in front of them, and the Egyptian army behind, and they didn't know what they were going to do. They couldn't fight, I mean they weren't warriors, right? They had been slaves for hundreds of years. They couldn't run; they were trapped and hemmed in on every side. Every piece of physical evidence that they saw around them said they were going to die, that's all, between a rock and a hard place.

The second one is an impossible dream, and that's the walls of Jericho. Look at verse 30: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days." Now fast forward about forty years, right? Moses had passed from the scene; Joshua was now leading the Israelites. Israel had crossed the Jordan and they were now in the promised land. Now they had to take it. They had passed the flooded banks of the Jordan, almost like their fathers had done in the Red Sea. They had crossed on dry land, but after they had crossed on dry land the flooded waters came behind them, and they were trapped. It was all guns ahead. It was kind of like Cortez when he took Veracruz, right? They burned the ships and said, "Guys, you're here.

There's no going back." So here the Israelites were, they were here in the Promised Land. They were ready to conquer Canaan, and the very first city was Jericho.

Jericho was a frontier town in a very strategic location in Canaan; it was a fortress guarding Canaan from her enemies. This wall around Canaan had stood for hundreds of years and in fact, it was the earliest fortified city known in modern scholarship. And see, it was fortified because these walls were tall and strong around Jericho. It is believed that in Deuteronomy 1:28 when the ten spies had gone into the promised land, that they went and saw Jericho first, and they said, "It's walled up to heaven." The walls were so tall. It's said that the walls were so wide that you could drive two chariots at the same time around the wall. These are really big walls. It was a fortified city. By the standards of the day, it was impregnable. Nobody was going to knock down that wall. And I would remind you that the Israelites were not soldiers. They were the descendants of slaves. Just a ragtag mob who had wandered around in circles for forty years in the wilderness. We can assume that these children of slaves had never seen such a fortified city. So, you can imagine when they go up and see this kind of city, what it must have looked like to them and how hopeless it must have been. "What do we have? How can we fulfill the promise of God and take Canaan? What are we going to do?" So, second was the impossible dream.

And third was the wrong place at the wrong time. That's the story of Rahab. Verse 31: "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies." Many of you are familiar with this story. Everything that could've been against Rahab was against Rahab, right? First of all, she was a Gentile. She was an alien from the commonwealth of Israel. She wasn't a part of the covenants of promise. Second of

all, she was an Amorite and in Genesis 15:16 it says that all of the Amorites were a race marked for destruction. Not only that, she was not what we might call an upstanding citizen; she sold herself. Everything, everything was against Rahab.

But she had a problem, somehow, she recognized that God was with the Israelite people. They were outside her city. She knew God was on their side. She didn't want to lose herself and her family. What was she to do? She knew that she couldn't come before God and say, "Look I'm a righteous person. You need to take care of me." No! There was none of that. A lady of ill repute. What was she to do?

Three seemingly insurmountable obstacles. But let's learn two lessons of faith here. There are two things that I think stand out very clearly in this text. First of all, faith requires a promise to believe. Faith requires a promise to believe. In Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." Faith is always a response to the revealed will of God. We will save ourselves a lot of misunderstanding and grief, frankly, if we recognize that faith always comes as a response to the word of God. Faith is not wanting something really badly. Faith is not hoping that maybe something good is going to happen. Faith requires a promise. Faith is trusting God simply to do what He says He will do. Faith is trusting God for the reality that I cannot see that He's already promised. You see, faith must have a foundation to stand on and the only foundation that's worthy of standing on is the word of God. So, what do we have? Faith is trusting in the promises that we find in the word of God.

Let's look at our story: you see, God told Moses what to do. Moses didn't just look at that Red Sea and say, "You know, I sure wish we had a bridge," or "You know, maybe if I kind of go here and I hold my staff just so, the waters will part." Now, how ludicrous is that? Moses didn't

make this up. He didn't know what to do. He was there, but then God told him precisely what to do. Exodus 14: "The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me?" Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground." See, it was a response to the word of God.

God told Joshua what to do. Joshua didn't look at that city and ponder the situation and think, "Wow I wonder if I would, in successive days, walk around this city and then blow my horn, and then the walls will fall down." How ludicrous is that? No, he didn't come up with that on his own. But he simply trusted in the word of God. On a scouting expedition in Joshua 5, he went out to examine Jericho and when he got out near the city he looked up and he saw a man standing there with a drawn sword. And Joshua said, probably pretty much like we would say, "Are you for me or against me?" And he said, "I am the commander of the army of the Lord." And so, whether that was maybe Michael the archangel, or it might have been preincarnate Jesus, he said, "This is what you're going to do. You're going to take your soldiers, and you're going to take your priests with their trumpets, and you're going to take the ark of the covenant and you're going to walk around that city, and you're not going to say a word you're just going to blow your trumpets. And you're going to do that six days, and then on the seventh day," as you heard in the children's sermon, right? "Walk around it seven times, blow your trumpets a loud blast, yell, and the walls are going to come down." I don't think Joshua probably expected that instruction. But what did he do? He said, okay, and he obeyed. God gave very specific instructions to Joshua.

What about Rahab? Now, God didn't use normal channels to communicate with Rahab. She was not an Israelite; she didn't know the word of God; she didn't know the law. Yet somehow, she understood that these were God's people and that God was fighting for them. She

believed. In Joshua 2 it says, “And she said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, who you devoted to destruction.” Somehow, some way, God had instructed her and promised her and told her about what was going on, so she asked the spies to have mercy upon her. Hebrews 11:31 says she was the only one in Jericho who believed. Somehow, some way, God opened her heart to see the truth of what was to occur.

You see, each of these three situations, these people had a word from God. They knew what God had promised and they trusted Him. The second thing that I think we need to see is the truth from these words. First of all, they had a word from God. But secondly, they obeyed. That’s pretty simple. They heard the word, and they obeyed. James 2:14 says: “What good is it my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works. Can that faith save him?” And then he goes on, “So also, by itself if it does not have works, it is dead. But someone will say, you have faith and I have works, show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works.”

You see, in these stories the Israelites faith was seen because they stepped out into the bed of the sea. How hard would that have been? Think if you were first in line! How hard would it have been to step into the sea, when you see the walls of water all around; it was a sea! The walls of water all around you. How hard would it be to step into there knowing that if something happened, if God gave up and let it go, you were gone. And yet, they obeyed. They were totally committed. They had to step into the bed to walk across. They had to obey. The Israelites when

they were conquering Jericho, they had to obey. And you can't tell me that there weren't some of them that felt a little foolish walking around a city, simply because God told them to. This is not what they signed up for. The priests were great and everything, and they maybe blew their horns well, I don't know. But they obeyed; they did what God said.

Rahab hid the spies. James 2:25 "And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way;" they told her to gather her family and not come out. They told her to put a scarlet rope down from her window and she would not be harmed. What did she do? She gathered her family and put a scarlet rope down. See? This is very simple. This is not brain surgery. When the word of God says something, then we simply obey it. And in each case, they were rescued. Faith expresses itself in action and obedience. As James says, "Show me your faith without works and I will show you faith with works." Two lessons to learn from these three stories, these three obstacles.

But now, let's look at four implications. Steve, all that is fine, well and good, but we live a long time from that and I'm not facing a Jericho, and I will probably not walk through the sea on dry ground, so how can I apply this truth to what I'm facing today? Let me suggest four ways. First of all, God puts obstacles in your life. God puts obstacles in your life. You will face obstacles and some of them will be whoppers. They will be so overwhelming that you see no way out. They come in a myriad of ways: financial ruin, maybe family issues, maybe your marriage is just hard right now, or maybe your children are disobedient, or maybe you can't find a spouse yet. Hard providences, hard obstacles. Sometimes it's health, sometimes you or the ones you love are in terrible health and you see no way out, and sometimes you lose the ones you love. How do you deal with that? Maybe your church is going through tough times.



Overwhelming obstacles, you see no way out. So, what do you do? The list goes on and on of the obstacles that are plunked in our path, and it would seem that there's no way of going over or around or under or through. What do you do? I believe that we start with the fact that God is the one who puts the obstacles in your life. God is never the author of sin, but if we believe that God is truly sovereign over His universe, we must believe that God orchestrates all things according to the council of His will: all things, even the bad stuff. The providence of God is beautifully defined in the 27<sup>th</sup> question of the Heidelberg catechism, let me just read that to you. "The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby as it were, by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures and so governs them that the herbs and grass, the rain and the drought, the fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, richness and poverty, yea all things come not by chance but by His Fatherly hand." But by His fatherly hand. When we speak of the providence of God, we declare that all things come from Him, and it comes from our Father's hand. Both the pleasing and the heart-rending! Both come from Him. God led the Israelites to the Red Sea so that He was their only way out. God led the Israelites to cross the Jordan so that Jericho would be the first city that they would come to. God chose Rahab for a reason, and God places obstacles in your path. It is always from a Fatherly hand, whatever you face.

Secondly, God puts obstacles in your life for a reason. God puts obstacles in your life for a reason. Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose," now look, all things are not good. But He places all things in your path for a reason. All things come from His Fatherly hand, for at least two reasons as we mentioned earlier: to test and strengthen your faith, and to declare His

strength in rescuing you. To test your faith, and to show Himself strong on your behalf. I love George Mueller and just the story of his life. Listen to what he writes, he said: “God delights to increase the faith of His children. I say it and say it deliberately, trials, difficulties, and sometimes defeat are the very food of faith. We should take them out of His hands as evidence of His love and care for us in developing more and more that faith which He is seeking to strengthen in us.” And again, he writes, “Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible. Faith begins where man’s power ends.” Now, let that soak in just a moment. “Faith begins where man’s power ends.” If you can fix your problem, you don’t need faith. In fact, if you can fix your problem you really don’t even need to pray about it, just go fix it. Because prayer in itself is a declaration that I am helpless to fix my problem, and I need you to fix it. Faith begins where man’s power ends.” It’s when you know that you can’t fix it, when the obstacle in your path is so overwhelming, that’s when faith comes in.

God puts obstacles in your life, God puts obstacles in your life for a reason, but number three, when faced with an overwhelming obstacle, think. I know I’ve said this the last three weeks, so we’re not going to land here for a long time. But when faced with an overwhelming obstacle we must think. Look to see what the Bible has to say about your situation. What do I know to be true about God? What do I know to be true about myself? What has He promised in His word to do? What does His word say about my situation? What do I know to be true in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ? J.G. Machen, founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, says it this way, he says: “The more we know of God the more unreservedly we will trust Him. The

greater our progress in theology, the simpler and more childlike will be our faith.” The simpler and more childlike will be our faith the more we know God.

Fourthly, it’s very simple. When given direction, obey. The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience; nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the coin. “Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” It’s not enough to know, but we must do.

Three seemingly overwhelming obstacles, two lessons about faith, and four implications. I know that some of you here this morning are facing insurmountable obstacles. There are things that you are facing in your life right now that you don’t see any way out from. I want to do more than teach about overcoming obstacles today. I want us as a body of Christ to stand together with you as you face your obstacle. So in a moment, if you are facing some overwhelming adversity, in a moment, I’m going to ask you to stand and as you stand we’re going to be looking around and if you stand, immediately there will be people around you that will come and pray with you. You don’t have to share that obstacle, in fact, I’m asking you to not share your obstacle, or the adversity that you’re facing. We don’t need to know; we know the one that does know. But I want to stand together as a community of faith, to be able to just stand and pray for one another, and we’re going to pray the two things that I mentioned earlier. That your faith would be strengthened, and that God would show Himself strong. So, we’re just going to take two, three, four minutes to just pray in small groups around our auditorium, just to pray that your faith would be strengthened, and God would show Himself strong. Very simple.

So, if you wish for someone to pray with you, would you just stand up, and we’re just going to gather around you, all over the auditorium, if there’s anyone? Are you facing any

adversity? There's one, gather around over here, two, okay. Get up right now, and let's go, let's go. Gather around them... anyone else? We're only going to take two, three minutes here, and if you don't want to get up that's okay, just pray where you're at, okay? Let's pray together.

Father you hear the prayers of your people. You know those of us who are hurting, who are struggling, who desperately need to know that You are there for them. Would you increase their faith? Would you show Yourself strong on their behalf? Father may we be a place where no one needs to stand alone? May we be a community of faith that love one another, and gather around each other looking to You alone to fix what we cannot fix? We look to you, trusting and obeying You, when You express Your will. Hear the prayers of Your people, show Yourself strong on our behalf, I pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

I would ask you to come back to your seats, or sit down wherever you are, whatever you desire. Thank you for doing that; thank you for participating. He hears the prayers of His people.

At this point I'm going to ask Charlie and His team to come up, we're going to celebrate the Lord's Table together. The Lord's Table is a feast that we get to celebrate together. We've talked about obstacles and adversities, but I'm reminded that the largest obstacle any of us face is our estrangement from God. Because of Adam's sin, we were God's enemies and the wrath of God was against us because of our sin. And there was a vast chasm between God's holiness and our sinfulness, and the situation seemed impossible. There was nothing that we could do to fix it.

But God, because He is rich in mercy and full of lovingkindness didn't wait on us, but God became a man to qualify Him to become our substitute. He lived a perfect life, fully obedient to the law, and then He died on a cruel Roman cross to pay the sin debt that I couldn't pay, to remove the wrath of God from against us, and to give us His very own righteousness.

Now for those of us who have put our faith and trust in Jesus alone, the chasm has been brought together.

In our Lord's Table, we celebrate that the wrath of God against us is stilled. No more is He angry with us; He calls us His children, His sons and His daughters. We get to pull up to the table and to feast with Him. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Table we come together as a family, to His table, to celebrate what He has done for us and to remind us once again that it is through His shed blood and broken body that we are invited to the table.

So on the night that He was betrayed He gave thanks, and taking the bread He broke it and He said, "This is my body which is for you, do this in remembrance of me," and in the same way He also took the cup after His supper and He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

I just love the picture of being a family: brothers and sisters together, gathered around the table, eating and drinking, in fellowship with one another, but more importantly or just as importantly, fellowship with God. He is here and He is present in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. If you are a believer today, and you don't normally come here, or this is your first time, or you belong to a church somewhere else, I just want to say you are welcome at our table, because it's His table. You are welcome. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, please come celebrate with us. If you are here this morning and you have not yet put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, I would ask that you would take this time to contemplate the claims of Jesus Christ that you have heard just today. Contemplate, think about them, right where you are and we look forward to the day that you get to celebrate the Lord's Table with us as well.

So, the way we celebrate the Table is we come down these middle aisles, we pass the basket, if you will pass by the basket. If you all would go ahead and take your place and put your connection cards there, if you have a request to start a conversation with us, or there's a place for prayer requests, or your offering. Come by and drop them in, but we celebrate the Table this way and then we go around the outside. So please stand with me, I will take a place over there in the alcove, if you just want someone to pray with you about something and maybe you didn't want to stand up, if you just want someone to pray with you about an adversity that you're facing, I'll be right over there, come see me. Let's celebrate the Table together.