

Something Better Hebrews 11:32-40, 8/4/19 Steve Harden

“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— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 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. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” Hebrews 11:32-40.

This is the word of the Lord. Many years ago, a lady came into my office and she was frantic. She was panic stricken. Her husband had just left her. I grieved with her and I promised to reach out to her husband, and I set another date the next week for us to get together. Well I reached out to him that week and he just was not interested at all. In the meantime, a friend had told her that if she believed hard enough, if she hoped hard enough and strong enough, if she just had enough faith, that God would have to bring back her husband and reconcile her marriage. So, when she came back into my office the next week, she was chipper, and she happy, and she came back in and said: “I know God is going to put my marriage back together again.” She was less enthusiastic when I had to tell her that God is not obligated to do that. I had to tell her that what she had was not faith, but she had hope. She was putting all her hope in something that the Scripture had not promised. As you can imagine, I didn’t win a friend that day. She wasn’t very happy with me, in fact, she was rather angry with me. But when I thought about our text today that Jen just read, she came to my mind. It’s funny how God brings things to your mind sometimes, isn’t it?

Over this summer as we’ve been thinking about Hebrews 11, we’ve learned that faith is wholehearted believing, betting your life on what you cannot see, but that you know is true because God

has said it's true. Staking everything on the promises of God. Faith does not mean that if I believe something or want something strongly enough, I can have whatever I want. My friends, God is not bound by my agenda. He can't be manipulated by me, no matter how strongly I believe something, or want something, if He has not promised to do what I want. Allow me a to be a little sarcastic here, do you remember Peter Pan and Wendy, saying: "I do believe in fairies, I do! I do!" wishful thinking, hopeful thinking, without any grounds to back it up. You see, faith does not mean that when you are faced with devastating situations or occurrences in your life, if you just have enough faith, God will miraculously intervene and they will disappear. That's not what Biblical faith is. Faith is not hope that tomorrow will be better. If God has not promised what I desire, the Bible instructs me to ask Him for it, to ask Him and plead with Him, we are encouraged to pray, and ask Him, and seek Him for my desire. But understand, He is not bound to do what I want, simply because I want it, or even because I want it really, really badly.

Our text this morning is a really good illustration of what faith is. In verses 32-40 here in chapter 11, we find two very distinct groups of people. The first group is not unlike the heroes of the faith he has mentioned before. He highlights amazing events that blow your mind: miracles of deliverance, miracles of protection, no question but that God has intervened on behalf of these people. Miracles that occurred because men and women believed God and trusted in His promises very much like the examples that we've looked at all throughout this summer.

But then, he introduces us to another group of people. A group of people that are very different. This group is also known for their faith, but these people suffer and are not rescued. No great miracle has occurred on their behalf. They experience pain and anguish. You can see this very clearly in verse 34, the first group they escaped the edge of the sword, and then in verse 37, this other group was killed by the edge of the sword. Very different outcomes, still, they are known for their faith; they are known as having great faith.

Great faith is recognized and commended whether God is seen in dramatic interventions, those events in history where we can all applaud and rejoice and say: "Yes! Look what God has done!" But you see, God is also pleased with the faith of those precious saints who suffer long and endure pain and hardship without losing hope in that invisible reality of one day being with Jesus. God is honored, and God is honored in both situations. He is equally glorified in both groups.

Now we've talked about it before that he's writing to those persecuted believers in Rome who are about to undergo the persecution under Nero. Some of them, no doubt, will lose their lives. And some of them will lose all their possessions, as we saw that happened before in chapter 10. So, he is writing to them, and he's telling them, "Look, it is not a sign of a lack of faith if you are killed for your faith, or if you lose all your possessions. If God does not come to you miraculously and rescue you, it's not a sign of a lack of faith. Don't interpret it that way. God is not punishing you because you didn't have enough faith." He says, "Faith is trusting God's promises, if He rescues you or if He calls you to endure." So, we're going to look at it in just two ways. Sometimes, God rescues His people. And sometimes, God calls His people to endure.

Let's look first that God sometimes rescues His people. We see this in verse 33 and 34 and the first part of 35. You see sometimes, God intervenes miraculously to rescue His people. These are the stories we like to tell our kids. They are the ones we've learned all these years. Now last week, we saw that God made water stand up, and the walls come tumbling down. God did that miraculously. God moved on behalf of His people. In our text this morning in verse 33, we see that He shut the mouths of lions, that's Daniel, right? Daniel and the lion's den. In verse 34 He quenched the power of the fire, you remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Miraculously, He rescued them. That's pretty exciting stuff. God breaks into history and moves miraculously to rescue His people. Again, in verse 34 Gideon conquered the Midianite army with 300 men armed only with lanterns and pots, now that's a miracle, isn't it? God moved on behalf of His people. There's no ambiguity here, God moved. Nobody can argue. It was God.

Sometimes, God intervenes through acts of providence. It's not always miraculous stuff, sometimes He moves through acts of providence. An act of providence is when God does amazing things without any amazing display, or any remarkable display. God is still intervening, just like He does when He performs miracles, but He uses normal, non-spectacular acts to accomplish what He wants to do. We see that in verse 31 from last week, how Rahab didn't perish because she hid the spies and put the scarlet cord outside her window. Nothing miraculous there, right? Verse 33, David conquers kingdoms and established righteousness throughout his kingdom, but it was all through conventional warfare. Verse 34 he writes about escaping the edge of the sword. This could be any number of people. We find David,

Elijah, Elisha and Jeremiah all escaping. Maybe it was the Jews under Artaxerxes rule as we read about in Esther, but you see, all of these, God orchestrated events without using any spectacular means. He worked behind the scenes using natural circumstances and situations to achieve victory and rescue. God uses providential acts all the time to care for His people. I know you could give examples as can I. He's doing it every day in 1,000 different ways. He changes the course of the river of my life. Time after time I've seen this.

As I was thinking through this text, I thought about how our roots are in Ponca City. I grew up there on a dairy farm, all those kinds of things. And it wasn't until about 10 years ago that we came to Tulsa amidst some pain and asking God, "What are you doing? What are you doing here?" But it was only a few months before we saw how He orchestrated things in our family that I knew exactly why. Oftentimes you don't know that soon. But I could see exactly why, He brought us here for 1,000 reasons, but one of them was to care for our daughter and new grandson. And He orchestrated all of that, but there was no miracle, there was no grand display. But through His providence, His kind providence, He worked His will in His time in our lives on our behalf. Sometimes God rescues His people through miracles, sometimes He rescues through acts of providence.

But sometimes, God calls His people to endure. We see this in the second half of 35 through 38. Having faith, having great faith is no guarantee that God will rescue you by miracle or providence. Let's read verse 35b-38: "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." You see, these people that are mentioned here, endured horrendous suffering. The writer wanted to be careful lest he leave a wrong impression. He did not want them to think that if God didn't rescue them by miracle or providence, that somehow it was a problem with their faith, that their faith was defective or somehow they'd been abandoned or God didn't care anymore. He says, no, that's not it at all. On the contrary, when you respond to difficult situations with faith, God is massively pleased, and He commends you for your faith. I would remind you that these

people made Hebrews 11 hall of fame. They are here memorialized for all time because of their faith, and yet God did not move to rescue them. He allowed them to endure.

My friend, God does not always stop bad things from happening. You know that and I know that. He doesn't always rescue His people, His believers, even if they have great faith. It's hard. Because I know that He could intervene, I know that He is able to intervene. But sometimes, He chooses not to intervene.

Verse 37 says that they were stoned and sawn in two. In history we read about Isaiah being sawn in two, this is probably referring to him. Think about who Isaiah was! Long ago, we looked at Isaiah 6, do you remember? That great and grand vision, "I saw the Lord holy and lifted up." This is the man who has had a vision that nobody else had! He saw the preincarnate Christ. This is the man who said, without qualification, "Here I am, send me!" This is the man who went year after year after year to his countrymen, and no one believed, yet he remained faithful in proclaiming the warning of the Lord. This is the man, talk about a hero of the faith, this man was faithful, and yet God did not intervene when they sawed him in two! Did Isaiah lack the faith to be rescued? Had God in any way forsaken Isaiah? No. God's hand was in His suffering as much as it would have been if He'd rescued him. Some escape the sword, while others are killed by the sword.

Think about Acts 12 there in the early church. Verse 1 says: "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belong to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." Do you remember the story? Later on in the account he was going to kill Peter in the same way, but God miraculously intervened in the middle of the night and rescued him from that jail. Both right here. Did He love Peter more than He loved James? No. Somehow, some way in His infinite will, He chose for James to show his faithfulness in giving his life, but Peter by being miraculously saved. Sometimes God intervenes and sometimes He doesn't. But both men are recognized for their faith.

At this point we need to consider, why these who suffered so much, why are they said to have great faith? And I think this is the point of this portion of the passage. The key is to remember that to have faith we must trust in what God revealed to be true. Without God's promise, it's simply wishful thinking. Look at verse 35 here in the first part, this is the transition verse: "Women received back their dead by

resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.” Again, this is the transition verse from one group of being rescued and the other suffering for the sake of the kingdom. In the first part, he references probably two women that we know had sons rescued from death in the Old Testament. There was the son of the widow of Zarephath who was raised from the dead by Elijah, and then Elisha raise the Shunamite’s son. How much joy these women must have faced and understood when they received their son’s back from the dead.

But then, we get to the second half of the verse. There are other women whose sons were tortured, refusing to accept release. Now, I think the author here is referring back to Jewish history that we’re not all that familiar with, but his original hearers would have recognized it immediately. In the Apocrypha, not Scripture, there is a story that is told. This was written during the inter-testamental period between Malachi and Matthew. There was about 400 years between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Antiochus Epiphanes was a Syrian king that greatly persecuted the Jewish people, and in 2 Maccabees 7 it details the grisly torture of a woman and her seven sons.

The story goes that the woman and her seven sons were arrested by Antiochus Epiphanes and the king tried to force them to eat pork, which was a violation of the Old Testament law, and they saw it as a turning away from God, and they refused to do so. And so, he tortured them in front of their mom one at a time trying to get them to cave. I mean, he did awful things: cutting out their tongue, cutting off their hands, all kinds of things. But each of the seven sons in turn, refused to obey the king. And they could have been released, but they refused to and were tortured and killed instead. They found the courage to resist the king and endure the torture, because of the truth found in our text. It’s illustrated so clearly.

Verse 35, the last part says: “So that they might rise again to a better life.” Again, this is not Scripture, but listen to the story that the original hearers would have heard. The second son in speaking to the king says: “You cursed wretch, you dismiss us from the present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life because we have died for His laws.” The third son, as they were cutting off his hands and his feet: “It was from heaven that I received these, for the sake of His laws I disregard them, from Him I hope to receive them again.” The hope of a resurrection! The fourth son: “It is my choice to die at the hands of mortals with the hope that God will restore me to life.” And when the last son was urged to give in and renounce the law, his mother whispered to him, and she said: “My son,

have pity on me, I carried you nine months in my womb and nursed you for three years and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beseech you my child to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also, mankind came into being. Do not fear this butcher but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers."

Do you see the theme that is running through this? The unifying theme of this discourse was that they bet the farm on the resurrection from the dead. They knew, because of God's promises, that they would one day be made whole. One day they would stand in the presence of their King. They suffered and would not renounce their faith so that they might rise again to a better life. How could these brothers and their mama stay steadfast in such a circumstance? It's only by faith. Faith in the resurrection to come. They believed the promise of the Messiah and that one day they would be raised again from the grave. They had hope in the invisible future, the reality that they could not yet see. That's the definition of faith.

So, Steve, what are the implications for us? Well there are two, and they're very simple. Sometimes God will rescue you. When you face difficulties, whatever they are, however impossible your situation may seem, know that God is able to move on your behalf. He has done it before; He can do it again. So, storm the gates of heaven with your prayers. Be faithful and diligent to plead with God to move on your behalf. Pray with all your might, come again and again and again to the throne of grace pleading your case, and know that He is more than able to grant your request. He sees you, and He knows you, and He loves you. You are His child, and He loves it when we bring our requests to Him. Pray and trust and ask Him to rescue you.

But secondly, sometimes God calls you to endure. Sometimes He says no. Sometimes He says wait. And sometimes, He says, let's do this instead. But please understand, it's not because He doesn't love you. It's not because there's some problem with your faith, that it's just not strong enough. My friend, that's a lie from the pit. It's not about how strong your faith is. So many people have abandoned Christianity because they don't understand this. They were told that if they believe hard enough, if they have enough faith, that God has to do what they want Him to do. It makes me angry. So many people's

faith is shipwrecked. All the hurt and the pain and disappointment that this error has caused, look, God is not obligated to perform according to my agenda. It's my agenda, it's not necessarily His.

If I can just get really personal here, two of my children face serious health issues, and I know many of you know that. And they have for years. I pray for them all day long, and much of the night. I weep for them but as yet, God has not healed them. I pray that He does, and I will continue to pray that He will heal them, until they are healed, or I die, I will be praying, going again and again and again before the throne of grace. But I can tell you, I could not stand up to the burden if I thought that God had not healed them because I just didn't have enough faith. I would be a puddle. I could not take it. But I don't have to, praise God. God is the only one who decides when and how or if He rescues. God determines what is best in every situation, whether rescued or sustained. If He calls on you to endure rather than rescue you, it is only by faith that you can endure. He has promised, my friend, that a better day is coming. Trust Him.

A better day is coming. There is coming a day when there's not going to be any more pain, and there's not going to be any more suffering or disease. There is coming a day when we'll never be tired, and we'll never be weak. There is a day coming when there will be leaping and dancing and running with nothing but joy and happiness. My friend, if you are called to endure difficult things in this life, trust Him. Trust Him that a better day is coming and in that day there will be no more pain, no more tears. And there is coming a day, because Jesus said there is coming a day, and I believe Him by faith. I believe that He would not lie to me. I believe He means what He says, and so I can trust Him. And how I yearn for that day, knowing that it's only a short way away.

And in the meantime, He calls us to endure and receive whatever we get in this life from a loving Father's hand, even though we don't understand. Whether He rescues, or He calls us to endure, we know Jesus and the experience that we know of Jesus is that a relationship with Him and knowing Him is better than anything else. I love the way John Piper puts it in his sermon on this text. He says: "The common feature of the faith that escapes suffering and the faith that endures suffering is this: both of them involve believing that God Himself is better than what life can give to you now, and better than what death can take from you later. When you can have it all, faith says God is better, and when you lose it all, faith says God is better." He is your reward and one day you're going to be with Him, and you will see just how



grand and glorious the One you've trusted in for so long truly is. My friend, suffering is God's special invitation to trust Him that there is a better day coming. So, endure by faith, let's pray.

Oh Father, we long for you to rescue us. We long for you to intervene in our lives, either miraculously or by an act of providence. Hear the prayers of your people. Hear us as we pray. But Father we know that sometimes you call us to endure, and so I pray that you would grant us faith. Grace us with faith that we might be faithful and strong and endure, believing that you are better, and the coming day will be better. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

At this time of our service we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Some call it Communion, some call it the Lord's Table, it's all the same thing. I hope that our look at this great chapter in the Bible, Hebrews 11 has been helpful to you, as we talk week after week about faith and trust. I've marveled at these Old Testament saints' great faith. They had promises that there was a Messiah to come, yet they never saw the fulfillment of that. In their lifetimes, the Messiah had not come yet. Yet they continued to believe, they continued to trust even though they could not see. I've marveled again and again about how much more faith was required of them than the faith that we have to practice, because you see, Jesus has come.

The promise has been fulfilled. He came so long ago, lived a perfect life, and then died and was resurrected again. We know Jesus, the promised one. The promises came true, and yet we do have something very much in common with these Old Testament saints. As they waited for His first coming, so we are waiting for His second. As I had mentioned before, there is a time coming when no more will I fight with this sin nature within me, no more will creation groan because of the fallen nature of what has happened, that it's not what it was designed to be, no more will injustice and wickedness be rampant, no more mass shootings. Jesus said: "I go and prepare a place for you," and that He will be coming again to transform this world and us into His very own image.

But he could only come the second time and do that, because He came the first time and He lived a perfect life and died and was raised again to new life. So, when we celebrate the table, we celebrate the coming of our Lord, we celebrate the broken body and the shed blood. But at the same time, we celebrate that He is coming again, and we know that we'll be with Him in paradise.

On that night, it is said that our Lord Jesus when He was betrayed, took the bread, and when He had given thanks He broke it, and He said: "This is my body which is given for you, do this in

remembrance of me.” And then after the supper He took the cup and He said: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

It is so important for us as we celebrate the Lord’s Table to look back on what He has done for us, the ransom He has paid for us, the sin that He bore that day on the cross. But I also think it’s important for us to look forward and to remember the ultimate consummation when we will be with Jesus. If you’re here this morning and you know Jesus, you trust Him and Him alone for salvation from your sins, then welcome to the table, please participate with us as we celebrate the broken body and the shed blood.

If you’re here this morning and you don’t really know if you know Jesus, or if you know you’ve never entrusted your life wholly to Him, let me encourage you to use this time to contemplate what you’ve just heard. Contemplate and think about the salvation that can be yours, that He offers freely to you, and we look forward to the day that You can celebrate with us. So, if you will, stand.