

Hebrews 11:29-12:3

**11** <sup>29</sup> By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. <sup>30</sup> By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. <sup>31</sup> By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. <sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. <sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup> They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— <sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, <sup>40</sup> since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

**12** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

THE SCOPE OF THE MEANING OF THE WORD “FAITH” IS MUCH BROADER THAN WE MIGHT THINK.

AFTER ALL, FAITH CAN DESCRIBE NOT ONLY RELIGIOUS BELIEF BUT CONFIDENCE IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND MEDICINE.

FOR EXAMPLE: PEOPLE MAY ALSO HAVE FAITH THE LIGHT WILL COME ON WHEN THEY FLICK THE SWITCH.

MANY TRUST IN THE TRUTHFULNESS OF POLITICAL FIGURES, OR THE VALUE OF HEALTH FOOD, VITAMINS, AND COUNTLESS OTHER THINGS, OR PEOPLE.

IN FACT, EVEN WHEN THINKING OF FAITH IN THE SPIRITUAL SENSE, IT COULD BE SAID ATHEISTS HAVE FAITH THAT NEITHER GOD, NOR ANY KIND OF HIGHER POWER EXISTS.

SUCH PEOPLE COULD BE DESCRIBED AS BELIEVING IN THEIR UNBELIEF.

OF COURSE, THE MOST COMMON PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH INVOLVES RELIGIOUS BELIEF.

THE SERMON TITLE TODAY: THE “PROS AND CONS OF BIBLICAL FAITH”, NARROWS OUR FOCUS ON FAITH DOWN EVEN FURTHER.

THE AUTHOR OF THE LETTER TO JEWISH-CHRISTIANS WAS WRITING TO PEOPLE WHO HAD UNDERGONE, OR WERE FEARFUL OF, PERSECUTION DUE TO THEIR FAITH IN CHRIST.

IT IS BELIEVED SOME OF THOSE HEBREW BELIEVERS HAD BEEN KICKED OUT OF THEIR HOMES AND LIVELIHOODS IN ROME, WHEN THE EMPEROR CAST ALL JEWS OUT OF THE CITY.

HOWEVER, THEY WERE ALSO IN DANGER OF, IF NOT ACTUALLY EXPERIENCING, PERSECUTION FOR BEING CHRISTIANS AS WELL AS JEWS.

IT IS NO WONDER SOME WERE WAVERING IN THEIR COMMITMENT TO CHRIST.

AFTER ALL, IF THEY STOPPED BELIEVING IN AND FOLLOWING JESUS THEY WOULD BE WELCOMED BACK BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS.

THE LETTER TO THOSE HEBREW CHRISTIANS WAS WRITTEN TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO CONTINUE TO HOLD FAST TO CHRIST, OR REPENT AND RETURN TO HIM IF THEY HAD ALREADY LET GO.

CHAPTER ELEVEN OPENS WITH A REMINDER ABOUT WHAT BIBLICAL FAITH IS: “THE ASSURANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR, AND THE CONVICTION OF THINGS NOT SEEN”.

A METAPHOR FOR THIS UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH CAN BE FOUND IN A BRIDGE.

WHEN WE COME TO A BRIDGE TO CROSS- WE CAN SEE THE PART WE WALK ON OR RIDE OVER. WE CAN SEE THE SIDES, AND ANY PART OF THE BRIDGE ABOVE OUR HEADS.

SOME TIMES WE CAN SEE A LITTLE OF THE SUPPORTS BELOW. HOWEVER, WE CANNOT SEE WHAT IS EMBEDDED DEEP IN THE GROUND OR BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE WATER.

AND YET THAT PART OF THE BRIDGE IS JUST AS REAL AND NECESSARY AS WHAT WE DO SEE.

SIMILARLY, WHILE WE CAN SEE SOME ASPECTS OF GOD THROUGH SCRIPTURE, PRAYERS, AND OUR EXPERIENCES, WE DO NOT AND CANNOT SEE ALL

BUT THIS DOES NOT MEAN GOD ISN'T REAL OR WORKING TO FULFILL HIS PROMISES.

THUS, THE DEFINITION IN HEBREWS IMPLIES A FAITH, THAT TRUSTS IN THE LORD GOD AND IN GOD'S WILLINGNESS AND POWER TO FULFILL HIS PROMISES.

AGAIN, THIS DOES NOT MEAN, WE WILL ALWAYS SEE THE FULFILLMENT OF EVERYTHING PROMISED.

NOR DOES IT MEAN, AS SOME THINK, THAT GOD WILL SAY YES TO EVERY SINCERE PRAYER, MADE BY CHRISTIANS.

INSTEAD, THE READING FROM HEBREWS OFFERS A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE FAITH OF ISRAEL AND THE BENEFITS OF THE PEOPLE'S TRUST IN THE LORD THEIR GOD.

THIS REVIEW OF THE FAITH OF GOD'S PEOPLE RECORDED IN THE BIBLE IS MEANT TO ENCOURAGE AND INSPIRE US BY LOOKING AT THEIR EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

TODAY'S READING OPENS WITH A KEY EVENT-THE SUCCESSFUL PASSAGE OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE, LED BY MOSES, THROUGH THE RED SEA.

IT WAS THERE THAT GOD'S PROTECTION AND FAITHFULNESS WAS SHOWN WHEN THE JEWS PASSED SAFELY THROUGH, WHILE THE EGYPTIANS WERE DROWNED.

IT WAS ONLY THEN THAT PHAROAH TURNED BACK FROM PURSUING THE FORMER SLAVES AND REALLY LET GOD'S PEOPLE GO.

OTHER VICTORIOUS EVENTS AND PEOPLE OF FAITH ARE ALSO MENTIONED. EACH ONE WOULD HAVE BEEN VERY FAMILIAR TO THE ORIGINAL RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER.

BUT THEN, IN VERSES 35-38 WE ENCOUNTER A REMINDER ABOUT THE NEGATIVE RESULTS OF FAITH THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO SOME.

SOME SUFFERED: TORTURE, MOCKERY, FLOGGING, CHAINS, IMPRISONMENT, AND PAINFUL FORMS OF DEATH. OTHERS LIVED LIVES OF BARE EXISTENCE WITHOUT A PLACE TO CALL HOME.

AND ALL THESE EXAMPLES MIGHT HAVE BROUGHT THE READERS ATTENTION BACK TO CHAPTER 11 VERSE 4.

THERE IT BEGINS THE TESTIMONY ABOUT FAITH WITH THESE WORDS: “BY FAITH ABEL OFFERED TO GOD A MORE ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICE THAN CAIN'S....”

REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO ABEL? HE WAS KILLED BY HIS BROTHER CAIN BECAUSE GOD BLESSED ABEL'S FAITH.

SO, DO YOU NOTICE WHAT IS MOST UNUSUAL ABOUT ALL THESE EXAMPLES?

FIRST, NONE OF THE PEOPLE LISTED, EVEN THE MOST FAITHFUL AMONG THE BIBLICAL FIGURES, WAS PERFECT.

SECONDLY, ALL STRUGGLED WITH SIN AND ALSO STRUGGLED TO HOLD ONTO FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISES.

FINALLY, THE EXPERIENCES OF SOME OF THOSE LISTED ALSO HIGHLIGHT WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED NEGATIVE RESULTS OF FAITH, LIKE SUFFERING AND DEATH.

DON'T YOU FIND THAT RATHER ODD WITHIN A PASSAGE THAT IS MEANT TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO KEEP THE FAITH?

TRULY, IT DOES NOT MAKE SENSE FROM A WORLDLY PERSPECTIVE, SINCE TELLING PEOPLE ABOUT POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OFTEN TURNS THEM OFF.

THINK ABOUT ALL THE ADVERTISEMENTS WE ENCOUNTER, AND HOW THEY ALL PROMOTE A PRODUCT WE SHOULD BUY, OR PERSON, OR CAUSE, WE SHOULD SUPPORT.

UNLESS REQUIRED BY LAW TO LIST POSSIBLE NEGATIVE RESULTS OF THE PRODUCT OR PROMOTION-SUCH THINGS ARE NOT MENTIONED.

AND YET, HERE IN HEBREWS, THE AUTHOR WHO WAS SEEKING TO ENCOURAGE AND STRENGTHEN FAITH, ADDS SOME REMINDERS ABOUT THINGS THAT DID NOT TURN OUT SO WELL.

SO WHY WOULD SOME OF THE CONS OF FAITH BE DESCRIBED, ALONG WITH THE PROS?

AND WHY WOULD THOSE EXPERIENCES BE INCLUDED AS PART OF THE LETTER'S WITNESS TO GOD'S POWER AND LOVE AND FAITHFULNESS?

THE SIMPLE ANSWER IS THAT IT REMINDS CHRISTIANS THAT THE BENEFITS OF FAITH, WHILE REAL AND POWERFUL, DO NOT MEAN WE ALL LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER ON EARTH.

THEREFORE, FAITH IS BETTER VIEWED AS MAP OR GPS THAT OFFERS SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE THROUGH THIS LIFE, IN BOTH GOOD TIMES AND BAD, FAILURE AND TRIUMPH.

SOMEONE ELSE EXPLAINS IT THIS WAY: "FAITH ALLOWS PEOPLE TO SEE BEYOND WHAT IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF THEM..."

THE EXAMPLES OF BIBLICAL FAITH MENTIONED IN HEBREWS ARE ABOUT THOSE WHO CONTINUED TO BELIEVE IN GOD AND HIS PROMISES, EVEN WHEN THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S WORD WAS NOT EVIDENT.

WE CAN BE ENCOURAGED BY ALL OF THOSE NAMED AND COUNTLESS OTHERS, WHO HAVE BECOME PART OF THE GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES MENTIONED IN HEBREWS 12:1.

THE FAITH THEY HAD IS A WITNESS OR TESTIMONY TO GOD'S PRESENCE IN THEIR LIVES.

THIS INCLUDES HOW THEY SHARED WHAT THEY SAW AND HEARD ABOUT GOD AND FROM THE LORD.

THOSE WITHIN THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES ARE DESCRIBED AS BEING LIKE SPECTATORS IN THE STANDS, WATCHING THE CURRENT PARTICIPANTS IN A MARATHON RACE.

BUT THEY WATCH AS THOSE WHO HAVE ALREADY RUN AND COMPLETED THE SAME RACE THEY ARE NOW OBSERVING.

THIS MEANS THEY UNDERSTAND THE PROS AND CONS OF RUNNING THE RACE OF FAITH IN GOD, AND IN SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST.

THEIR WITNESS AND THEIR PERSEVERANCE IN FAITH CAN BE A SOURCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO ALL THOSE WHO RUN THE RACE.

IN OTHER WORDS, THEY BOTH WATCH AND CHEER ON CHRISTIANS TODAY IN THEIR FAITH JOURNEY.

THUS, ALL OF US WHO SEEK TO LIVE BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST ARE BEING WATCHED AND ENCOURAGED BY OUR ANCESTORS IN THE FAITH.

AND REMEMBER, THEY DO SO AS THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE PROS AND CONS, AS WELL AS PERSONAL TRIUMPHS AND FAILURES ALONG THE WAY.

INDEED, THEY HAVE STUMBLERD AND FALLEN LIKE WE DO, BUT THEY ALSO PERSEVERED LIKE WE ARE CALLED TO DO.

OUR GOAL IS THE SAME AS THEIRS WAS. TO RUN AND FINISH THE RACE AS BEST AS WE ARE ABLE.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE FROM OLYMPIC HISTORY THAT OFFERS A MODEL FOR OUR CALLING TO PERSEVERE IN FAITH:

IN 1968, THE COUNTRY OF TANZANIA SELECTED JOHN STEPHEN AKHWARI TO REPRESENT IT IN THE OLYMPICS.

ALONG THE RACECOURSE FOR THE MARATHON, HE STUMBLERD AND FELL, SEVERELY INJURING BOTH HIS KNEE AND ANKLE.

BY 7 P.M., A RUNNER FROM ETHIOPIA HAD WON THE RACE, AND ALL THE OTHER COMPETITORS HAD FINISHED.

JUST A FEW THOUSAND SPECTATORS WERE LEFT IN THE HUGE STADIUM WHEN AKHWARI CAME LIMPING THROUGH THE GATE, HIS LEG WRAPPED IN A BLOODY BANDAGE.

THOSE PRESENT BEGAN TO CHEER AS THE COURAGEOUS MAN COMPLETED THE FINAL LAP OF THE RACE.

LATER, A REPORTER ASKED HIM THE QUESTION ON EVERYONE'S MIND: "WHY DID YOU CONTINUE THE RACE AFTER YOU WERE SO BADLY INJURED?"

HE REPLIED: "MY COUNTRY DID NOT SEND ME 7,000 MILES TO BEGIN A RACE; THEY SENT ME TO FINISH THE RACE."

CHRISTIANS ARE ALSO SENT TO FINISH THE RACE OF FAITH- BUT WE DO SO WITHOUT THE PRESSURE OF HAVING TO WIN.

REMEMBER, WE ARE NOT SIMPLY INDIVIDUAL RUNNERS, BUT INSTEAD ARE MEMBERS OF A TEAM.

AND OUR TEAM, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, HAS ALREADY WON THE RACE, SO OUR TASK IS SIMPLY TO FINISH, SO WE MAY ENJOY THE PRIZE CHRIST HAS ALREADY WON.

HIS VICTORY AND OURS THROUGH HIM IS ANOTHER WAY, THE PRIMARY WAY, WE CAN BE ENCOURAGED TO CAST ASIDE EVERYTHING THAT HOLDS US BACK.

DOING THIS IS NOT ALWAYS EASY, SOMETIMES A SMALL HURT, GUILT OVER A SIN, OR AN INJURY OF ANY KIND CAN CAUSE US TO STOP-AND WANT TO GIVE UP.

INDEED, SOME CHRISTIANS SEEM TO EXPERIENCE MORE STRUGGLES AND ROADBLOCKS IN FAITH THAN OTHERS.

BUT EVEN FOR THOSE WHO APPEAR TO SAIL THROUGH LIFE WITH A STRONG AND ENDURING FAITH-THERE ARE SET BACKS KNOWN PERHAPS ONLY TO GOD.

NONE OF US IS PERFECT, ALL SIN, ALL FALL DOWN OR ARE KNOCKED DOWN IN SPITE OF OUR FAITH IN JESUS AND THE SALVATION HE HAS GIVEN US.

THIS IS WHY WE ARE CALLED TO LOOK TO JESUS EVEN MORE THAN OTHER CHRISTIANS.

IT IS JESUS HIMSELF WHO WATCHES AND WAITS FOR US JUST BEYOND THE FINISH LINE, TO BESTOW UPON ALL WHO FINISH HIS VICTORY.

I CLOSE WITH THE CHORUS OF AN OLD HYMN, WHICH SUMMARIZES THE MESSAGE OF TODAY'S EPISTLE READING:

"O VICTORY IN JESUS, MY SAVIOR, FOREVER. HE SOUGHT ME AND BOUGHT ME WITH HIS REDEEMING BLOOD;

HE LOVED ME ERE I KNEW HIM AND ALL MY LOVE IS DUE HIM, HE PLUNGED ME TO VICTORY, BENEATH THE CLEANSING FLOOD." THANKS BE TO GOD! AMEN

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