

## **Triumph and Suffering (Case Studies in Faith)**

### *Hebrews 11:32-40*

Today, is the last of four sermons out of Hebrews 11. Over the past few weeks Steve has been encouraging us to allow these sermons out of Hebrews 11 to give us a deeper understanding of what it means to live by faith and therefore what it means to please God. He has encouraged us to have in mind an area of life in which you need to please God – a relationship, an area of obedience or some circumstance in your life. Hopefully, as we've been going through this series you've gained some insight into what a life of faith looks like in that area.

Today, as we continue to look at faith, the writer of Hebrews is going to help us understand that sometimes a life of faith will lead to triumph in this world and at other times it will lead to suffering. For some of you here today, it might be the first part of this that you really need to hear – faith can lead to triumph. But for others of you, it might be the second part that you need to hear – faith can lead to suffering. Both are possible results of faith.

We are looking at Hebrews 11:32-40. Let's look first at the idea that living by faith sometimes brings triumph.

#### **I. Living by Faith Sometimes Brings Triumph (vv. 32-35a)**

*<sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,*

Up to this point the author has spent some time on each example of faith that he has presented. But as we come to this part of chapter 11, he begins to simply list names and situations without any details. His point seems to be that there are simply too many examples of faith to recount and so he sort of speeds up and speaks in more general terms.

The first four men in this list are from the times of the Judges. None of them were perfect men, but each of them by faith was used to by God to gain victory over oppressors. Gideon's army of 300 delivered Israel from the Midianites (Judges 6:34). Barak fought against the Canaanites and won victory (Judges 5:19). If you know anything about Samson, he had all sorts of flaws, but he was also one of whom the Scriptures make clear lived with a deep consciousness of the invisible God and by faith he brought deliverance from the Philistines (Judges 13:25). And then finally, Jephthah delivered the Israelites from the Ammonites.

He then mentions David and Samuel and the prophets. David, though he had some epic failures with sin, he lived with a strong faith in God that was expressed in many ways, for instance as he took on Goliath or when lived in caves fleeing from Saul. His life was characterized with a settled belief in God's providence and faithfulness.

Samuel, who was the last of the judges and a prophet as well, was one of the greatest leaders in Israel's history. His life and ministry was marked by faith in many ways as he called Israel to walk in covenant faithfulness and through his leadership he helped inspire Israel to defeat the Philistines. From Samuel, the author proceeds to mention the prophets generally. The OT records many faithful prophets who spoke and lived with faith in God - people like Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah among others.

The author then goes on to list some of the feats of faith that such people accomplished. He says:

*<sup>33</sup> who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> 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.*

The referent of the pronoun, *who*, is the list of people he has just mentioned. These are some of their triumphs of faith. He says they *conquered kingdoms*. Certainly, this was true of the judges, but it was especially it was true of King David who won great military victories and extend the borders of Israel. These men *performed acts of righteousness*, which the NIV translates, "administered justice." People like David and Samuel helped establish a just government that administered justice.

When it says that they *obtained promises* it is probably speaking of specific promises made to them as opposed to the ultimate promise that he will talk about in verse 39. Through faith they received specific blessings promised by God.

By faith, Daniel was one who shut the mouths of lions when he was thrown into the lion's den in Babylon. And when we think of *quench[ing] the power of fire* we think of Daniel's contemporaries, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who as captives in Babylon refused to bow to the King Nebuchadnezzar's idol and as a result they were thrown into a fire, but by faith, they escaped unharmed. Listen to what they said as they were about to be thrown into the fire:

*<sup>17</sup> "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. <sup>18</sup> "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."*

Daniel 3

These three men looked to a God that they could not see and trusted Him. They had a faith that said, "We will trust Him if He does deliver us and we trust Him if He doesn't." And as it turns out, by faith they escaped the flames unharmed.

By faith, others escaped the sword. David escaped from the sword of Saul; Elijah from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2ff); and Elisha from Jehoram (2 Ki. 6:31ff), etc.

By faith there were those who from weakness were made strong. This was true of Gideon. As well, Samson, who after losing his strength, by faith once again was made strong by God that he might win a great victory over the Philistines. By faith they became mighty in war and put foreign armies to flight. This was true of all of these men that the author lists.

That last thing he lists is an example of a triumph of faith is found in verse 35. He says:

<sup>35</sup> *Women received back their dead by resurrection;*

One example of this in the OT is found in 2 Kings 4 where it tells of a woman whose son was raised by Elisha (2 Kings 4:17-37). When her son died, she sought out Elisha and asked for his intervention. By faith, Elisha prayed and God restored life to the boy.

You get a sense that the author of Hebrews could go on and on with such examples. But he has made his point: Living by faith sometimes brings great triumph. By faith these men of old experienced some amazing triumphs in situations that looked pretty dismal from a human perspective. Think about it – Being in a lions den? Being cast into a raging fire? A dead son? Three hundred soldiers facing thousands? From a human perspective all of these situations looked hopeless, but by faith all of these men believed that there really is a God in the unseen world and they trusted Him and He turned all of these “hopeless” situations into triumphs of faith. Living by faith sometimes brings great triumphs.

As you think about your life and the challenges that you face (some which may seem hopeless) or maybe this area of faith that Steve has had you thinking about over the past three weeks, do you ever feel like there is no way it can turn out well? Do you ever feel like, “Sure, God worked like that back in Bible times, but I doubt He does now?” Let me ask you a question; is the God to whom these men looked to in faith and as a result experienced these great triumphs, still the same God today?

A number of years ago, Cindy and I had a friend named Dave who was diagnosed with testicular cancer. It was a scary thing to face. He had surgery and then went through chemo. Eventually, they found cancer again. This time it had spread throughout his lymph system. At that point the prognosis was not good at all. But Dave continued to pray for healing and as did many of his friends. He continued to trust God. At some point in that process Dave began to have a sense that God was communicating to him that He was going to heal him. Of course this only stirred up Dave’s faith as well as ours and we continued to ask God to heal him. Dave went through another surgery and more chemo. And though the prognosis was not good, now, 20-plus years later, Dave married and has a little girl they adopted and he is serving in ministry full-time in New York City. By faith, he was healed. By faith he experienced a great triumph in his life when, humanly speaking, it didn’t look good.

God is present and active in our world today with the same power and wisdom as he was when Daniel was in the lion's den or when David defeated Goliath. And because this is true, refuse to look at things in your life only from what is possible from a human perspective. Look to God. When these examples of faith did that they experienced great triumphs.

I think the writer of Hebrews wants these stories of triumph to blow air on the embers of our faith that our faith might be stirred up into a roaring flame of faith. He wants us to trust God. He wants us to look to Him in faith regardless of our situations, because by faith sometimes there are great triumphs. And when we exercise faith in this way, we please God.

Now, as we come to the middle of verse 35, there is a transition. As we read the next several verses, we don't see triumph, we see suffering. The author wants us to understand that though every expression of faith pleases God, not every expression of faith results in a triumph. Sometimes living by faith brings suffering.

## II. **Living By Faith Sometimes Brings Suffering** (vv. 35b-40)

It is interesting that the author makes this transition from triumph to suffering without any explanation. I think the reason why is that from the author's perspective these examples of people whose faith did not bring triumph, but suffering, are still examples of strong faith. And so he says that in some cases woman received back their dead through resurrection . . .

*and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;*

Many commentators describe the events surrounding the martyrdom of a 90-year-old Jewish scribe, Eleazar, as an example of what the author is talking about here. Jewish historians record that during the Maccabean era, between the Old and New Testament, the Greek ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, tried to get Eleazar to renounce his commitment to God. He promised Eleazar that he would release him if he would do so. But Eleazar did not accept this release, but rather by faith he chose to be tortured and killed rather than to renounce his faith in God so that he might inherit *a better resurrection*.

When the author says, *better resurrection*, he is making a contrast to the earlier use of resurrection in this verse. The first one referred to resurrection in this world such as the woman's son experienced when Elisha raised him, but that boy eventually died again. This *resurrection* is better because it is a resurrection to never ending life. People like Eleazar and others could have forsaken God and been released, but instead by faith they refused to do so because they were seeking this *better resurrection*. They believed that the unseen world was more real than anything else. Their faith brought suffering.

Verse 36 goes on to say:

<sup>36</sup> *and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.*

The prophet Jeremiah was one who experienced such treatment. He was beaten and put in stocks (Jer. 20:1-2; 37:15). His own family mocked him (Jer. 20:7). Of others he says . . .

<sup>37</sup> *They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated*

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned for proclaiming Jesus (Acts 7) as were others. Isaiah was one who tradition says was *sawn in two* at the hands of King Manasseh. And earlier the author had said that some by faith escaped the sword (v. 35), but here he says that by faith some were *put to death by the sword*. Faith doesn't always result in the same result. Sometimes there is triumph while others times there is suffering. He says that others were roughly dressed and destitute in a worldly sense. This was true of the prophets like Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and Elisha, but probably other prophets as well. These were people who were poor in terms of earthly resources and position and privilege and yet he makes this amazing statement about them. He says they were:

<sup>38</sup> *(men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.*

The world looked at such people that he has been describing and judged them to be unworthy and so the world tortured and killed them; the world persecuted and imprisoned them. But God says of such people that *the world was not worthy* of them. What an amazing commendation! By faith, these men suffered all sorts of things; some to the extent of being martyred for their faith. All of them, through their faith, gained God's divine approval.

The Hebrews needed to hear this message, because they were suffering for their faith. And because of their suffering, they were tempted to turn away from Christ. And yet, these Old Testament examples of faith would have reminded them that there were others who suffered deeply for their faith and yet remained faithful and because of that faithfulness they were commended by God. The writer is urging the Hebrews, in light of these examples, to continue to live with endurance. He wants them to know that sometimes faith leads to great triumphs, but that at other times faith leads to suffering.

We need to hear this message as well. There is teaching out there that says that if you just have enough faith, if you just believe enough, everything is going to turn out as a triumph in this world. But if we think that then when suffering comes, we are set up for grave disappointment either with God or with ourselves. We will either think God has

failed us or we will think that since I'm suffering there must be something wrong with my faith. And that simply may not be the case because sometimes faith leads to suffering.

Now in the context of this passage, the suffering that he is talking about here is clearly referring to being persecuted or mocked or ill-treated for one's faith. That many be the kind of suffering that you are facing. But I think it is appropriate to also apply this principle that he has been talking about here to other situations in which we are trusting God and yet things don't turn out in triumph.

Earlier I told you the story of Dave who by faith was healed of his cancer. But I'm sure many of us have known other people who had cancer and who trusted God and yet they weren't healed. Did God let them down? Was there something faulty in their faith? No. Sometimes faith leads to triumph and other times it leads to suffering.

When I think of another person I know who went through this very experience of trusting God with a deep faith for healing and yet she wasn't healed, she was a great example of faith to me because even though things didn't turn out in triumph, she continued to trust God. She continued to walk by faith. She endured to the end. She clung to the reality of unseen things. And I have no doubt that she was commended by God for her faith

Sometimes faith leads to triumph. For some of us, this is the message that you need to hear. You need your faith stirred up that you might truly look to God in faith to work in your life – in your marriage that is struggling, or for your kids, or for a financial concern, or for freedom from the sin that has enslaved you. Sometimes faith leads to triumph and so trust God.

For some of you it might be more important today to hear that sometimes faith leads to suffering. Maybe you've been thinking God has failed you. Or maybe you have been beating yourself up for weak faith. Maybe the truth of the matter is that God in his wisdom in your situation has allowed faith to lead to suffering. Be encouraged that if that is where you are, you are in the company with many saints both in the Bible and in more recent times who have walked the same path. It is an opportunity to continue to look to the unseen world and walk by faith in a God who really does love you and care about you. Keep walking by faith.

As we prepare to take communion this morning, I want to read the last two verses in this passage. These verses serve as kind of an epilogue to all of chapter 11 and they point to what we celebrate here today. He says:

*<sup>39</sup> And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup> because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.*

He says that all these people he has talked about in chapter 11 gained approval through their faith. And yet while this is true, he says that they did not *receive what was prom-*

*ised.* Yes, some obtained promises, but none received The Promise, which refers to the New Covenant initiated by Jesus Christ.

This is the, *something better*, that God has provided for us in the New Testament era. Through Christ we have now been made perfect. Our sin has been dealt with through the cross and we now have unrestricted access to God and the promise of eternal life. This is something that these Old Testament examples of faith could only look forward to. For us, however, this is something that we have fully experienced.

Today, as we share in this remembrance of what Christ has done for us through His death and resurrection be reminded that if you have trusted in Christ for salvation, you are forgiven. Be reminded that you have full access to God. Be reminded that God in the person of His Spirit now lives in you. And let these truths encourage you to press on with a life of faith.