**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (39): The Book of Better Things**

**“What Faith Does and Does Not Do”**

**Hebrews 11:29-40**

**March 16, 2025**

Sometimes it’s easy to be intimidated by the men and women of Hebrews 11. Instead of being encouraged, we can easily be overwhelmed by the remarkable lives they led. Their faith makes them seem almost superhuman – as if they’re in a world of their own. When we hear of their glorious exploits, we think to ourselves, “There’s no way that we can have that kind of faith. There’s no way we even come close.”

However, let’s not forget that they were also men of great failure. For example, after Noah built the ark and survived the flood, he got drunk (Gen. 9:20-23). Abraham lied – not once, but twice, in order to save his own hide (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Jacob was known as the deceiver, best remembered for having stolen his brother’s birthright (Gen. 27:1-29). Moses committed murder (Ex. 2:11-14). David committed adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11-12). Samson had an illicit relationship with Delilah (Judges 16).

Further, those great men and women of faith were not immune to painful suffering and unimaginable hardships. As we shall see, that’s not because their faith faltered, nor was it because they were being punished. They suffered intensely and some were even slaughtered *in the midst of great faith* and *by means of great faith*.

That’s the point our author is driving home in the verses that are before us today (11:29-40). He is illustrating what faith *does* and what faith *does* *no*t do. Yes, it *does* enable us to see great victories (11:29-35a). But no, it *does* *not* insulate us from suffering and persecution, and physical and financial deprivation (11:35b-38). While presenting both sides of the same coin, our author provides various examples of the Israelites’ faith throughout their lengthy history.

**A. What Faith Does: From the Exodus to the Entry into Canaan (11:29-31):** “*By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.*”

***First*,** it was “by faith” the Israelites moved forward into the Red Sea on dry ground. The story is told in Exodus 14. Although it seemed impossible to get across the sea, Moses assured them that Yahweh would act on their behalf; “*Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still*” (Exodus 14:13-14). Then the Lord said to Moses, “*Tell the people of Israel to go forward*” (14:15). **Q.** Then what happened? **A.** The people witnessed “an act of God.” He sent a strong east wind which divided the waters, and the sea became dry land. But how were God’s people delivered from the Egyptians? Our author says it was because of their “faith.” They were willing to move forward – step by step. Had they not stepped out in faith – nothing would have happened!

***Second***, it was “by faith” the walls of Jericho came tumbling down (v. 30). Our author fast forwards through the forty years of wilderness wanderings (the period of unbelief) and resumes with the Israelites’ entry into Canaan. The story is told in Joshua 5:13-6:27; once again, three components go into the story: **(a)** the people witnessed “an act of God;” He was the One who brought down those walls. **(b)** The means God used was their willingness to march around those strong, fortified walls for seven days, led by seven priests blowing rams horns; **(c)** the key that released the power to bring down those walls was their conviction that God would act. Apart from their faith, nothing would have happened! They were trusting in the promise that God had already given to Joshua: “*Moses, my servant, is dead. Now then, you and all these people get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land that I am about to give them …I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses*” (Josh. 1:2-3).

***Third***, it was “by faith” that Rahab, the prostitute, concealed Joshua’s spies and helped them escape (v. 31). The story is told in Joshua 2. There we learn that Rahab was also a foreigner, a non-Israelite. Yet in God’s amazing providence, she will become the great, great grandmother of King David (Rahab – Boaz – Obed – Jesse – David). Jesus, therefore, in His human nature descended from Rahab. What mattered to God wasn’t the blood in her veins, but the faith in her heart!

This is not the only place in the New Testament where she is commended for her faith. James refers to her to support his thesis that faith without works is dead: “. . . *was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead*” (James 2:25-26). No matter that she lied; her decisive actions saved the lives of two Israelites, while putting her own life at risk! Those actions were based on her belief that the God of Israel had delivered them from Egypt, and had opened the Red Sea, and had defeated the other nations before crossing the Jordan; “*For the LORD your God, He is the God in heaven above, and in earth beneath*” (Josh. 2:11). That was her testimony of faith, and God honored it. He saved her.

**B. What Faith Does: From the Settlement in Canaan to the Early Monarchy (11:32-35a):** “*And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Sampson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 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. Women received back their dead, raised to life again*.” This is but a small sampling of people who displayed strong, triumphant faith. Six are mentioned by name.

**Gideon** was one of Israel’s judges who delivered them from the seven-year oppression of the Midianites – with only 300 men armed with trumpets and torches in empty jars (Joshua 6-7). **Barak** was a military leader that God used to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Canaanites and their general, Sisera (Josh. 4-5). **Samson** was the judge who defeated the mighty Philistines (Josh. 16:23-31), and **Jephthah** was the judge who delivered Israel from the Amorites (Josh. 11). **Samuel** comes after **David**, bringing him into closer contact with the sequence of Israel’s prophets, mentioned in the verses immediately following.

So, what did these great people of faith do? The list of their achievements is given in verses 33-35a. They are presented in general terms, but it’s not difficult to identify many of the events our author has in mind. They are striking examples of what faith does:

**1.** They “*conquered kingdoms*” (v. 33a). Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, and David come to mind. **2.** They “*administered justice*” (v. 33b). The judgeship of Samuel comes to mind (1 Sam. 12:3-5); as does the kingship of David (2 Sam. 8:15) and Solomon (2 Kgs. 10:9). **3.** They “*obtained promises*” (v. 33c). The promises God gave to men like Gideon (Judges 6:16) and David (2 Sam. 7:11-16) are notable examples of this.

**4.** They “*shut the mouths of lions*” (v. 33d). This is a clear reference to Daniel, thrown into the lions’ den because of his faithfulness to Yahweh (Dan. 6). **5.** They “*quenched the fury of the flames*” (v. 34a). This is a reference to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s great golden image (Dan. 3). **6.** They “*escaped the edge of the sword*” (v. 34b). This would be a reference to any number of victories won in battle, or to those who were delivered from near death. Elijah was delivered from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2); Elisha from her son, Jehoram (2 Kings 6:31ff); and Jeremiah from Jehoiakim (Jer. 36:19-26). **7.** Their “*weakness was turned to strength*” (v. 34c). This may be a veiled reference to David’s slaying of Goliath or Samson’s slaying of the Philistines. But it could easily apply to all those noted above.

**8.** They “*became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies*” (v. 34d). This was true for many Israelites in the nation’s history, from the days of Joshua and the Judges through the many kings that led them to victory. They knew, in the words of Jonathan, “*Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few*” (1 Sam. 14:6). **9.** “*Women received back their dead by resurrection*” (v. 35a). The most notable examples were the widow of Zarephath whose son was raised from the dead by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17), and the son of the Shunammite woman who was raised from the dead by Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-36). But there’s a flip side to this coin . . .

**C. What Faith Does Not Do (vv. 35b-38).** In the words of F. F. Bruce, “Faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world: this was no doubt one of the lessons which our author wished his readers to learn.” The men and women in the verses that follow had just as much faith as Joshua and David and Elijah and Daniel. Yet they were called to suffer “by faith” – as the epilogue to this chapter makes clear: “*They all were commended for their faith*” (v. 39). So, what’s the rest of the story?

**1.** “*There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection*” (v. 35b). If anyone ever wants to know what faith is, it’s right here. These people were tortured for their faith. If they had wanted to be released, all they had to do was recant their faith, yet they “*refused to be released*.” Why? Because they believed the future resurrection life would be infinitely better and more glorious than anything this present life has to offer. Faith *doesn’t* say, “If God really loved me, He would deliver me from the hands of those who would torture me.” Faith *says*, “There is a resurrection life that is infinitely better than what I might gain if I escaped torture.”

**2.** “*Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment*” (v. 36). This may well refer to Jeremiah and all that he suffered (Jer. 20:2; 37:15; 38:6ff). Further, King Asa imprisoned the prophet Hanani when he rebuked him for not trusting in *Yahweh* (2 Chron. 16:7-10); and King Ahab imprisoned Micaiah for prophesying his death (2 Kings 22:26-27).

**3.** They “*were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword*” (v. 37a). Jeremiah may also have been on our author’s mind when he speaks of those who were stoned. According to tradition, this was Jeremiah’s fate. Other prophets were also stoned (2 Chron. 24:21; Matt. 23:37; Luke 11:49-51; 13:13-34). Isaiah, according to tradition, was the prophet sawn in two by a wooden saw. We know that Elijah “escaped the edge of the sword” (1 Kings 19: 10), but here we read that some, through faith, “were killed by the sword.” That was the fate of Jeremiah’s fellow-prophet Uriah. He was brought before King Jehoiakim and killed by the sword (Jer. 26:23). By faith one lived, and by faith the other died. The same was true in the apostolic age; King Herod Agrippa “*killed James the brother of John with the sword*” (Acts 12:2); but when he tried to do the same to Peter, Peter escaped (Acts. 12:6).

**4.** “*They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground*” (vv. 37b-38). What an amazing summary of the experience of so many in Israel’s history. Elijah and Elisha “wandered in deserts” (1 Kings 19:4; 2 Kings 2:8). When Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them in caves (1 Kings 18:4, 13). David hid in a cave from his enemies (1 Sam. 22:1; 24:1-7), and the people of Israel hid from the Philistines “*in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns*” (1 Sam. 13:6; 14:11). Yes, people of great faith live in poverty and suffer greatly at the hands of the world.

But let’s look closely at God’s assessment of all who are described in these verses. These were men and women of whom “*the world was not worthy*” (v. 38). If that doesn’t turn our value system upside down, then nothing will! These people were treated as outlaws and outcasts – unfit for civilized society. The truth is the so-called civilized and sophisticated society was not fit for them! That simply means that knowing God, and suffering on His behalf, is better than the health and wealth and anything else this world has to offer.

**D. The Epilogue (11:39-40):** “*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God provided something better for us, so that only together with us they would be made perfect*.”

When the author says “these,” he’s referring to the preceding heroes of faith (11:4ff). When he says “all,” he omits none of them. Every single one of them were “commended” on account of their faith. Faith does not guarantee financial, physical, personal, or social success. Faith is clinging to the promises of God whether He parts the Red Sea for us or we find ourselves living penniless in a cave. Faith is hoping in God whether we are promoted at work or lose our jobs. Faith is trusting in Him whether we are delivered from the sword, or we die by its sharp edge.

Further, the reason why these Old Testament saints did not receive *the ultimate promise* was because God’s plan provided something better for us. With the coming of Christ, the ultimate promise has been fulfilled (Cf. Gen. 3:15). Those of us “in Christ” have a better covenant, with better promises based on a better sacrifice. One day, “they” together with “us” shall be made perfect. Together, we await this perfection that will appear only at Christ’s second coming (Heb. 12:26; 13:14). Until that day comes, we press on – because faith is *being sure* of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see!