

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY? (Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 15

Faith: Victorious, No Matter What (Hebrews 11:32:12:3)

Scripture First

Please read the entire passage carefully in more than one version *before* you look at the notes.

A Passage to Ponder

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Heb 12:1-2)

Overview

It seems as though the Writer starts to gallop at verse 32, realizing that if he continued through the Hebrew Scriptures at the same pace, this section of the letter would be disproportionately long. He acknowledges that he does not have time (or space) to go into detail about many others who trusted God and acted accordingly. So he compresses his message into several "phrases of reminiscence."

- Six people are mentioned by name: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel.
- There is a fleeting reference to "the prophets." This would include people like Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, and Amos.
- He then strings together a list of actions. To readers familiar with the Old Testament, these clauses would have conjured up powerful memories. For example, the clause "shut the mouths of lions" would have been associated with Daniel, the clause "quenched the fury of the flames" would have

referred to the deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the blazing furnace, and the clause "women received back their dead, raised to life again" would be a reference to the miracle performed by Elijah in the home of the widow of Zarephath.

- In the middle of the passage, the word "*others*" occurs as a kind of break. Everything before it is in the active voice and everything after it is in the passive voice. We may be tempted to infer that those in the first part of the passage had an active faith and those in the second part of the passage had a passive faith, or that those in the first part *triumphed* while those in the second part *endured*. It is more accurate to say: **They all triumphed**; they simply triumphed in different ways!

At the beginning of the chapter we noted that the faith of Abel and that of Enoch had different outcomes. Both were motivated by faith; in a sense, it was Abel's faith that cost him his life and it was Enoch's faith that meant that "he did not experience death." Sometimes we triumph more in adversity than in achievement.

- The Writer obviously wants us to see the importance of perseverance, even when this makes us unpopular or results in suffering. "The world was not worthy of them," but they were commended for their faith. That makes the picture at the beginning of chapter 12 so appropriate. We are in a race and our predecessors in faith are packing the stadium to cheer us on. We are to throw off every encumbrance as we look to Jesus, who "for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Understanding the Allusions

In addition to the names cited in verse 32 there is a list of actions: "who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised. It's not so difficult to identify the allusions with biblical characters and possibly with the Maccabean martyrs, who resisted idolatrous Greek rule in the second century BC. According to tradition, Isaiah was placed in hollowed-out tree trunk and sawn asunder. Other people probably referred to in these "phrases of reminiscence" are the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24), Elijah, Jeremiah and Zechariah (2 Chron 24:21; Matt 23:27). The point is that they were prepared to suffer in the present because they believed in God and were filled with hope regarding the future. In the scheme of things they had to await the fulfillment of the promises even more so than we do (11:39-40).

"Whose Weakness Was Turned to Strength"

What a great statement that is! Some have drawn attention to the fact that many of the people mentioned by name in this passage demonstrated their weakness (Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and even David), but God was able to use them anyway. Whether or not that is a point the Writer wishes to make, it is true that God delights in using the weak. Sometimes "the strong" need to be brought to the place where they recognize their own limitations (Judges 6:12-16; 7:1-8; 1 Cor 1:26-31; 2 Cor 12:7-10; these references are worth looking up).

The Supreme Example

Jesus himself is the supreme example of the faith that endures present hardship and even disgrace because it is convinced of God's faithfulness. He looked through the unimaginably horrible anguish of the cross to the "joy set before him." Meditate on this passage.

Some Questions to Consider

1. Do adverse circumstances sometimes cause you to wonder whether God has abandoned you, or at least that his silence means that you are out of favour? What does the passage (esp. the contrast between those before and after the word "others" in verse 35) say to you?
2. Reflect on and respond to the following statement: "Those in the first part of the passage were victorious as a result of their faith, but those in the second suffered on account of their faith."
3. Think about the importance of hope *for Jesus* as he passed through the passion (12:1-3).
4. Just how would one fix one's eyes upon Jesus? What does this mean?
5. Do you think the comfort of the church in Canada is the cause or the result of our lethargy? Are we complacent because we are not persecuted or are we not persecuted because we are complacent?