

Hebrews 11:23-12:2
Exodus 2
Psalm 136

“Faith and Perfection”

May 16, 2021

I love that last line!

“God saw the people of Israel – and God knew.”

God sees.

And God knows.

It’s also worth noting that verse 2 says that “when she saw that he was good” she hid him three months.

Just as God created all things – and saw that it was good (Genesis 1-2),
so now Moses’ mother saw that *he was good* –
and then his sister stands at a distance “to know what would be done with him.”

And then later, Moses looked and *saw* the burdens of his people –
and saw no one around (v11-12) –
so he tried to do something about it –
but then feared because “this thing is known.”

That illustrates very nicely our problem:

When *we* see – and *we* know – that doesn’t mean much!

We see – but what can we about it?

We know – but we feel pretty helpless to do anything about it!

And when we act – like Moses –

the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Moses seems to understand that he is the one who will deliver Israel –

But he needs to learn to *trust God* –

and God is the one who *sees* – and *knows*.

And when God sees – and God knows – then God does what he has promised.

We sing about that steadfast love – that *hesed* of God – in Psalm 136.

Sing Psalm 136

Read Hebrews 11

Everyone lives by faith.

For some people, their faith is in a certain ideal of the family.

They have this picture – this hope – this idealized vision of what a family should be.

And with that hope in view – they believe that if they do certain things right,

then they will attain the result in which they hope.

I remember one time we were driving to Bible Study.

Ginger and I were having a fight – disagreeing about something or other.

We quarreled all the way to Bible Study.

The topic of the discussion that evening was about marriage and parenting.

So we started talking about our struggle – our fight –
and how we were working through it.

At one point, one young lady burst in – “Ah, but look at you now –
You’ve fought and worked through it – and you are so much stronger!”

Ginger and I looked at each other, and then at her,

“No, this is the debate we had in the car tonight.

We’re still not through it.

We’re still figuring it out.”

Her jaw hit the floor – and for the first time, I began to have hope for their marriage.

Until that night, she had thought that if they could just figure out these two things,
they would have a strong marriage to build on.

The problem is – marriage isn’t strong enough.

If your hope is in marriage – if your faith is in marriage and family –
then it will collapse under the weight of your life.

What are you believing in?

As we go through these faithful saints of the Old Testament,

Hebrews shows us that their *faith* was in Jesus Christ.

And because they saw him – by faith – they were able to walk by faith
in the midst of all sorts of challenging circumstances!

1. By Faith, They Were Not Afraid (11:23-31)

In verses 23-31, there are seven “by faiths” –

Seven episodes that reflect the centrality of faith from the Exodus to the Conquest.

So let’s look at these seven “by faiths”!

As we go through, we will see a common thread to these 7 episodes.

In all seven, there is an “easy” road and a “hard” road–

there is some danger that they faced if they walk by faith.

But faith gives you not only vision, but also courage to walk the difficult road.

²³ *By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they*

saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith, Moses' parents hid him.

And there are two reasons given for their action.

First, "they saw that the child was beautiful."

Does that seem odd to you?

What if Moses had been an ugly baby?!

But this is simply reporting what we heard in Exodus 2.

"When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months."

There is nothing complicated here!

He was a cute baby!

Moses' appearance is set forth as a sign of God's favor.

But more important is the fact that his parents "were not afraid of the king's edict"

By faith they saw that the hope of Israel was found in the promised "seed"--
a son who would deliver them from slavery.

By faith, they were not afraid.

There's been a lot of fear over the last year.

People on both sides have been "afraid of the king's edict."

Some feared Trump – others feared Biden.

Some thought that the mask mandate would never go away –

"once they have power, they never let go..."

Amram and Jochebed did not fear the king's decree.

Why?

Because they remembered God's promise to Abraham!

After 400 years of slavery, God would send a redeemer!

So they knew that even if the king caught them and killed their baby (and them),
they had nothing to fear.

And so,

*²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of
sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he
was looking to the reward.*

Moses renounced his Egyptian inheritance.

Reared in Pharaoh's house, he could have had anything he wanted.

He could have remembered Joseph and said,

"Hey, I can be faithful in the midst of glory and honor!"

Joseph was second-in-command to Pharaoh,
 why can't I be a ruler of Egypt too?
But the life of faith doesn't fit into a cookie-cutter.
 For Moses, life in Pharaoh's court would have been a life of sin.
 James tells us, "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it,
 for him it is sin." (James 4:17)
 James says this in the context of rebuking
 those who think only with their eyes—
 those who say "come, let us go into such and such a town"
 and make a profit.
In Moses' day, the people of God were suffering.
 For Moses to hide his identity and receive honor
 while God's people were mistreated,
 would have been to deny Christ!
 All of the benefits that Moses enjoyed as a prince of Egypt
 were due to the enslavement of his people.
Therefore, Moses forsook everything this world had to offer
 in order that he might share in the sufferings of Christ.
He forsook the "fleeting pleasure of sin"
 because he saw that which is permanent.

This is an important contrast.

 The pleasures of sin are described as "momentary" or "fleeting"
 but the reward is eternal.

 And in the light of the discussion of apostasy in chapter 10,
 you cannot help but see that Moses is being used as a contrast
 to those who would deny the faith rather than suffer with God's people.

 But Moses preferred to endure "the reproach of Christ."

 Like Christ, Moses exchanged the pleasures he could have had
 in order that he might suffer hardship with the people of God.

Remember how faith is the substance of things hoped for –
 the evidence of things not seen. (11:1)

And those who would draw near to God must believe that he exists –
 and that he rewards those who seek him. (11:6)

Well, Moses was looking to the reward!

 Moses saw – by faith – that the promises of God were better than the pleasures of Egypt.

And *he saw that* at a time when the people of God were slaves to Pharaoh –
 and had been for nearly 400 years.

If Christianity consisted of a few thousand oppressed slaves who were helpless and hopeless –
 would you believe?

Lord, increase our faith!

All of this is summed up in verse 27 – in the third “by faith”:

²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

Once again faith is bound up with seeing that which is invisible.
Faith is spiritual sight–
being able to see beyond the outward appearance.

Moses, like his parents, was not afraid of the anger of the king.
Faith not only enables you to *see* the spiritual reality of the situation,
but it also gives you confidence in the middle of even the most difficult situation.

Why?

Because when you see what God is doing at the end of history,
then everything that is happening around you is put in perspective.

Moses left Egypt by faith – not yet knowing *why*.

He endured, as seeing him who is invisible.
When you see by faith, then your whole perspective changes.
With your eyes you may see what Moses saw with his eyes:
failure, ruin, and disaster.
But Moses saw “him who is invisible.”
By faith he saw that God had a future for his people.
And so he fled into the wilderness in faith.

Why is God doing this?

Why am I going through this misery and affliction?

Faith does not have all the answers!

If you had all the answers, you wouldn’t need faith!

Faith *sees him who is invisible!*

By faith, we see Jesus.

²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

By faith Moses kept the Passover (28)

As the angel of death, “the Destroyer of the firstborn,” passed through Egypt,
Moses and the Israelites trusted in the blood of the sacrifice,
believing God’s promise that they would be spared.

Think about that night.

What would have happened to the one who said,
“Sure, I believe – but what’s the point in sprinkling blood on my doorpost?
Faith is what matters, right?!”

Faith without works is dead.
And dead faith is not a living faith.
Dead faith is, by definition, dead.
And so a person who says, “I believe, but I won’t sprinkle blood” –
doesn't really believe!

So if a person says, “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t want to get baptized” –
they don’t actually believe in Jesus.
If they say, “I believe in Jesus, but I don’t want to obey him” –
they don’t actually believe in Jesus!

It would be like saying, “I believe God, but I’d rather stay in Egypt...”

(read)

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

Notice that the problem with the Egyptians is here described as a lack of faith.

Israel crossed the Red Sea by faith.

Egypt drowned in the sea because they did not believe God’s promises.

Think about it!

If an Egyptian had offered a lamb at Passover,
and sprinkled blood on the doorposts,
what would have happened?
His firstborn would not have died!

If an Egyptian had crossed the Red Sea in order to join himself to the people of God
and go to the Land of Promise,
he would have walked through on dry land!

The Egyptians were drowned because of their lack of faith.

Sometimes this gets used in a quasi-mystical sense.
If you have enough faith...

No.

If you have any faith – that is quite sufficient to walk through the Red Sea,
because you will walk with Moses and the people of God!

If you do not walk with Moses and the people of God,
then you do not have faith!

³⁰ *By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.*

Israel marched around the walls for seven days—
looking like idiots in the eyes of men—
because they believed God.
They believed God, so they did what he said —
and so God gave them the land!

³¹ *By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.*

By faith, Rahab welcomed the spies (31)
and she was spared, not perishing “with the disobedient” (lit. the “unbelievers”).

Rahab believed God.
She had heard of God’s mighty deeds in Egypt —
and so she understood that her life depended on submitting to Israel’s God.
So by faith she welcomed the spies and protected them.

Some people struggle with the fact that she deliberately misled the king.
How can a lie be considered an act of faith?
But James 2:25 says that Rahab was justified by works
“when she received the messengers and sent them out another way.”
Truth and love are inseparably connected.
And what she said was true...

“When the gate was about to be closed at dark,
the men went out.”

Now, they actually went *out on to her roof* —
but she spoke the truth in love!

It would not be loving to the spies to add that phrase —
and, for that matter, it would not be loving to the king either —
since it is not love to kill innocent men!

So, speaking the truth in love, she deliberately misled the king!
Just about the only time in my life where this has been appropriate
was when an angry (and abusive) husband
demanded the address where his wife was staying.

I told him that I did not know.
Which was *technically true* – I didn't have the address memorized!
But he took me to mean that I didn't know where she was.
And I was fine with that!

If the person demanding the information is going to use that information to harm others,
then you may answer wisely and prudently,
in such a way as to love both parties!

2. Through Faith, They Lived and Died (11:32-38)

³² *And what more shall I say?*

What more shall I say?

(In other words, if you don't get it by now, you're not going to get it!)

So he quickly summarizes another 7 heroes of the faith:

For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—

Gideon was the general whom God had given a great victory over the Midianites
as 300 men with torches, clay jars, and trumpets overthrew a great army.

Barak led a small force of ill-equipped Israelites
against Sisera's army of iron chariots

Samson killed 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey,
and at the end of his life, brought down the temple of the Philistines
with only his bear hands.

Jephthah was a mighty warrior
who delivered Israel from the Ammonites.

David was the great king after God's own heart

Samuel was the last judge and the one who anointed both Saul and David as king.
He was also a faithful prophet of God.

the Prophets were faithful examples to Israel who spoke the word of the Lord
from generation to generation.

Some of these are interesting choices:

Jephthah, Samson, and Gideon all had serious character flaws.

But these flawed deliverers still walked by faith.

That is a useful reminder for us who are painfully aware of our failings.

God uses even flawed people for his purposes—

he uses *you*—not because of your great talents, but because of your faith.

And having named these 7 examples of faith,

Hebrews then gives 21 characteristics of their faith.

³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

It is tempting to associate particular phrases with the heroes of verse 32.

The first three have to do with the establishment of the kingdom
“Conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises.”

Then come three about escaping certain death
“Stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire,
escaped the edge of the sword”
(You hear echoes of Daniel and his three friends)

Then come three about military might:
“Were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war,
put foreign armies to flight.”

The cycles of three are then broken by an emphatically forward-looking statement:

Women received back their dead by resurrection.

Elijah had raised the son of the widow of Sidon

And the Shunnamite woman received her son back from the dead
by the faith of Elisha.

But then others were tortured—refusing to accept release,
in the *hope* of the resurrection.

There is no story in the OT that fits this description.

This may refer to the scribe Eleazar,
from the story told in 2 Maccabees.

The point that Hebrews is making is that faith is not something
limited to “biblical” characters.

2 Maccabees 6-7 tell the stories of several Israelites who died
rather than deny their faith.

Again the message is clear:

Do not set aside your faith—no matter what the cost.

(Read v36-38)

³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two,^[a] they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

According to the traditions of the Jews,

Jeremiah had been stoned to death,
and Isaiah was sawn in two after prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem.

But even those who escaped death lived lives of poverty and destitution.
Yet while deprived of all wealth and possessions,
the world itself was not worth as much as they.
The cosmos was not worthy of them.

If you look at the history of the ancient world,
you will find many realms that had greater power and glory than ancient Israel.
Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia—
these were the mighty powers of the age.
But even these nations in all their pomp and glory
are not worthy of these wandering nomads and exiles.

Again,
it all has to do with whether you are judging things
based on what you can see with your eyes,
or on what you can see by faith.

Peter reflects on this in 1 Peter 1, when he starts his epistle:
“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion...
according to the foreknowledge of God the Father,
in the sanctification of the Spirit,
for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.”

By faith, you see what God has done in Jesus Christ at the end of history—
that through his cross and resurrection he has triumphed over sin and death—
that the powers of this age have been dethroned—
and that he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

3. Faith and Perfection (11:39-12:2)

Still, having heard of these heroes of the faith, you might be tempted to say,
“But I’m not like them!”

And you’re right.
You aren’t like them.
You have something *far* better than what they had!

³⁹ *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,*
⁴⁰ *since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

“All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.”
In verse 33 we are told that they “obtained promises”

but here we are told that they “did not receive what was promised.”
Certainly Joshua obtained the promised land.

The judges obtained the promised deliverance from their enemies.

David obtained the promised kingdom.

But these were just the shadows.

None of them were permanent.

The land went into captivity,
more enemies kept attacking,
and even the Davidic kingdom was exiled for a time.

They did not receive what was promised.

Apart from us, they were not made perfect.

In other words, we bring completion to the fathers and the prophets.

NOT because of how great we are—but because of Jesus.

Because of the great mercy and grace of God toward us.

Remember that the word “perfect” does not mean “morally perfect” in Hebrews
but “complete”

OT history is incomplete without us.

Incidentally, this is a great passage to show to dispensationalists.

Abraham, Moses, and David were incomplete without us.

The church is not something incidental to God’s purposes.

The church is what brings the OT to perfection.

“God had provided something better for us,
that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

In order to understand what this “something better” is,

12:1-2 reminds us of all that we have learned from Hebrews about who Jesus is.

Read 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Especially since Hebrews is using the image of a race,
it would be easy to think of this cloud of witnesses
as those who are watching *us*.

But the word “marturion” is never used of spectators in the NT.

These are not passive spectators who are watching us,
they are witnesses to Christ and his sufferings.

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—

those who speak to us of what they have seen.
Because by faith, they saw Jesus—they witnessed his suffering,
even as they endured suffering themselves for his sake.

Barak and Samson and David bear witness to you through the pages of scripture
that God is faithful to his promises.
Abraham and Moses still speak to you from God's word.

What do they tell you?

“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,
and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,
who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
despising the shame,
and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

What is slowing you down?

Lay it aside.

Is there sin clinging to you?

Get rid of it.

And run with endurance.

How can you lay aside these weights and sins?

How can you run with endurance?

By looking to Jesus.

By faith.

He is the founder and perfecter of our faith.

He is the founder—the champion—
the one who establishes our faith.

He is also the perfecter—the finisher—
the one who brings all things to completion.

Because Jesus, too, endured the temptation of apostasy.

He had opportunity to turn aside—to renounce his calling—
but he endured even the cross—“for the joy set before him.”

Now you are called to run with endurance

for the joy set before you.