

## God's Gracious Gift of an Unbearable Burden, Part IV- *The Making of Heaven's Heroes*

Call to Worship: Psalm 24

Hymn #488- *Lead on, O King Eternal*

1<sup>st</sup> Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-16

Hymn #493- *Who is on the Lord's Side?*

2<sup>nd</sup> Scripture: Hebrews 11:17-40

Hymn #487- *Faith of Our Fathers!*

### Introduction:

When you think of the heroes that are often presented to us by the world, names such as Spiderman, the Hulk, the X-Men, Wolverine and etc, might come to mind. And these fictional characters are often presented to us as heroes, because, by their super powers, they serve to save humanity by "beating the bad guys." Or perhaps, in a more realistic sense, we might attempt to label muscular giants, such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger as true heroes, or karate champions such as Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris. Or, for some it might even be those gifted athletes who tend to master the art of their sport, such as Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretsky, Derek Jeter, Eli Manning or any other number of sports stars. Whatever the case may be, the world's heroes are generally made up of those who excel in various *physical* ways. They are gifted with an above average portion of strength, talent, IQ or even good looks.

But brethren, it is significant to note that the heroes on God's list, look quite different than the heroes presented to us by the world. You generally won't see "heaven's heroes" plastered on the front of anyone's t-shirts or receiving contracts from *Nike* or *Wheaties*. God's heroes look like the people listed here in Hebrews, chapter 11. And what classifies these, mostly, "rejects of the world," as heroic in any sense, is the way in which they overcame their trials and difficulties *not* by their own strength, but by their living faith in the living God. These people simply trusted God, and they took leaps of faith in that trust. They acted faithfully, daring to assume that "the invisible God who has promised," would most assuredly fulfill every one of His promises, no matter how impossible they seemed, from the standpoint of man. And by this means, they prospered and succeeded in the truest sense. No, they made no name for themselves in this world. In fact, many, like their Lord and Savior, were hated, despised, persecuted, and even killed by the world. But, they yet overcame the world, and prospered in the ultimate sense,

because they have tapped into the divine power of God, by their faith, which enabled them to live within the revealed will of God, unto the glory of God. To be sure, they were all sinners...some even murderers and adulterers at one point in time or another. But through the shed blood of Christ, they obtained the righteousness of God, and they went forward and became "more than conquerors" in His name!

Up to this point, we have considered three Scriptural examples, which confirm that God's children will, at times, be given unbearable burdens to bear. However, we have also seen that such burdens are always ordained unto the good of the burden bearer. Unbearable burdens are God's gracious gifts to His children, enabling them to make strides in their sanctification (in their pursuit of holiness) that could not be made otherwise. In our first example, we saw how the Apostle Paul and his companions had improved upon their ability to trust in the "God who raises the dead" when the sentence of death was in them. In our second example, we saw how David had learn to better avail himself of the Lord's infinite resource of strength, when he was hard pressed and without any strength of his own. And then, last time, we saw how the Apostle Paul was called to bear a "lingering thorn," a messenger of satan, sent to beat him, ultimately ordained by God, to keep Paul from being exalted above measure because of all of the revelations he had received. And in Paul's humility; and in Paul's weakness, he was endowed with the power of Christ, guaranteeing the ultimate success of his every Gospel mission.

This morning then, we move on to consider our fourth and final example of this series, which I have titled, *The Making of Heaven's Heroes*. And unlike the previous three examples, we will not be focusing our attention solely on one individual. Rather, we will consider a general list of examples (especially taken from verses 32 and following), and we will divide these examples into two groups, for a particular reason that I will mention in a moment.

Let me first just state the great benefit of bringing Hebrews, chapter 11, into this study. In chapter 12:1, we are told that the examples found in Hebrews 11, are a "great cloud of witnesses who surround us," as we run the race of faith that is set before us. Now, it also states that we are to keep our eyes fixed on Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith, but we ought to take note of this cloud of witnesses in some respect as well, which is why the author gives us this "catalog of the faithful" in chapter 11. Remember, the author of Hebrews is addressing a people who are in danger of falling away from their simple trust in Christ. The pressure on them was

great, and they were strongly tempted to turn away from Christ, only to revert back to the OT ceremonial laws (which were really shadows pointing to the true substance of Christ). And the author of Hebrews is seeking to exhort them to stand fast in their faith; to abide in Christ, no matter what. The direction that they were tempted to move toward was a deadly trap, that may have offered them some temporal relief in this world, but it would have been at the great expense of losing their fellowship with God.

And so, one of the ways in which the author seeks to motivate his audience to press on, and to improve upon their faith, is by giving them a list of OT examples who themselves were called to have faith amidst the great and difficult trials and challenges that they faced. And this list, is a list of the "faithful" overcomers. This great cloud of witnesses, stands around us, as it were, cheering in the stands, as we run our race, ever reminding us of their own success. Yes, they were imperfect, but they overcame nonetheless, in Christ. And so, brethren, these are the ones who we look to as our examples as well, in so far as we find that they overcame and conquered by their faith. Our eyes are always fixed on the flawless, blessed Christ, but these men and women; this catalog of "heaven's heroes," helps to motivate us onward, as we consider even the specific ways (given here in Hebrews 11) in which they stood firm and overcame very difficult trials and tribulations, not too unlike our own. In other words, brethren, they have a voice, and we want to hear them speak to us, especially regarding the way in which they made good use of the grace and promises of God, in order to assure their success. And what we see even more in these individual examples, is not so much the strength of their personal faith, but rather the unflinching, immovable faithfulness of their God, who met their faith with His divine power and blessing! These were faithful in various respects; they indeed overcame, but the greatest and most glaring testimony of all, is that testimony lying behind it all; namely, the testimony of a God who cannot lie; a God who does whatever He promises, even unto the parting of seas, the moving of mountains and the raising of the dead! But suffice it to say for now, brethren, that these examples are here for our consideration, and we would do very well to make good use of them, especially as we prepare to endure the trials and bear the burdens that lie in our paths.

Why then am I dividing several of these examples into two groups? Because you will notice that there are two general outcomes described here, both of which *testify to* and

*authenticate* the reality and conquering power of each individual's faith. One group (described in verses 32-35a) overcame with an outcome of miraculous deliverances, and the other group (described in verses 35b-38) overcame by remaining faithful while enduring great hardships and even death. Both groups identify with each other in the common fact that they overcame by faith. It is significant to consider both groups, lest we falsely assume that the second group was somehow less important or less faithful in the sight of God.

Now, let me quickly illustrate this with two examples from the Book of Acts (chapter 12), which are not addressed in this text. Two Apostles were arrested and taken into custody by King Herod, as he began to harass the growing church. First, James was arrested, and he was killed with the sword. At that moment, James' ministry on earth came to a sudden stop. Immediately after this, recognizing that he was gaining favor with the Jews by persecuting the church, Herod had Peter arrested. However, God takes extreme and miraculous measures to free Peter from the prison, and Herod is soon after this killed. James is murdered, Peter is spared...both on God's watch. Was Peter more beloved and faithful than James? Absolutely not. Both men served out their pre-ordained course of ministry. And, at that time, God saw fit to use the death of James as a means of advancing His glorious kingdom, while sparing Peter unto the same end. James conquered, and his faith was even magnified in his death. Peter conquered, being called to endure for a while longer until he was called to face his own martyrdom. And so, brethren, there may be times that God calls you to suffer and to bear an unbearable burden even unto a point of no release or death. You may pray fervently to be released of the burden, but you may die with it, leaving it, only and finally at the grave. And there may be times that you will pray fervently about a burden, which God will remove in the most amazing and miraculous of ways, revealing His power in some great way, to you and others. In both cases, you ought not to doubt God or question your faith. The important thing is, yes, to pray about the burden, but even more so, to remain faithful; to do what you are called to do, and what you are capable of doing, unto the glory of God, leaving the outcome to God, on all accounts. In other words, brethren, remain faithful unto death, and let God be God in every outcome. Unfortunately, we tend to hear all of the stories of the William Careys and the Adoniram Judsons, who have been given long life to prosper in the mission field, while not being told of the many unsung heroes, who have even died before making it to the shores of these foreign lands. Both groups are posted on the "wall of faith;" both groups make up the catalog of "heaven's heroes," and we never want to forget that!

Having this in mind, let us consider a general description of both groups, as described in Hebrews 11, before bringing this all to a helpful conclusion.

## **I. Conquering in Life** [Read Heb. 11:32-35a]

The author of Hebrews has spent the bulk of this chapter going over specific examples of individuals who have manifested a genuine, working faith, such as Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob and Moses and etc. Realizing that, were he to list everyone in Scripture, and then every single example of specific time periods that these individuals had successfully manifested their faith, he would probably have to add a lot more pages to his letter than would be necessary. In other words, his point is well proven. He has given enough examples to show his readers that the type of faith they are called to exhibit now, in the midst of their present trials, is in common with the faith that has been expressed by saints all throughout history.

And so, at the end of the chapter, he simply gives a summary lump of many other examples, that he just does not have the time or need to describe individually. That is why he says, "What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and all of the judges and David and the prophets...etc." He has already taken them through an aerial sketch of the patriarchs and Moses and Joshua, and they could continue on with this sketch on their own, moving through the Judges, the kings and the prophets. And what they will find; and what we would find, if we did so, brethren, is that the children of God of all ages, are people with feet of clay like us, and yet, they have accomplished great things by means of their steadfast faith in their God and Savior.

But again, you will notice that he lists, in summary form, several ways, in which these individuals had overcome, some in very amazing, miraculous ways, and some by means of their unwillingness to compromise their faith in God, even unto death. Notice, the first list:

1) Through faith, some subdued kingdoms; indeed, kingdoms that were far stronger and more advanced than their own. [The Israelites entering Canaan under Joshua, the walls of Jericho...etc, David, Hezekiah...etc]

2) Through faith they worked righteousness. It was a lot easier and more favorable to blend in with the other nations, exchanging gods and such, but to claim your God *alone* to be the One true God...that could get you into trouble and leave you out of the trading loop [Elijah, faithful kings who destroyed the idols...etc]--a lot easier to do what everyone else is doing, young people. Taking a stand for righteousness will bring you mocking and remove your chances of obtaining a popular status in school or among friends.

3) Through faith, they obtained promises. [Abraham and Sarah, Joshua...]

4) Through faith, some stopped the mouths of lions [Daniel refused to stop praying to his God]

5) Through faith, some quenched the violence of fire [Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego]

6) Through faith, some escaped the edge of the sword [the faithful kings]

7) Through faith, some, out of weakness were made strong [Like Paul--David, All of the prophets, Nehemiah]

8) Through faith, some became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens [David and his mighty men...]

9) Through faith, some women received their dead raised to life again [Elijah and the widow's son--she provided the last of her food for him; Elisha and the Shunammite's son--she cared for the prophet]

You see, brethren, what everyone of these examples have in common is that these people all faced impossible situations; the odds were against them from every outward standpoint, but they yet overcame and prospered by means of their faith in God. In other words, their invisible God met their faith and prospered them in ways that clearly revealed His divine power and sovereignty. And in and by these trials, their faith and strength were increased, and ultimately they made it home to glory. None of them had it easy. They all had to fight the good fight; they all had to lay hold of eternal life. But God made them victorious in Christ. To the world, they were dejected, sorry outcasts. But to God, they were heaven's heroes...why? What makes a hero

of heaven? They learned to trust God and to remain faithful when it could have been very easy to budge in any other idolatrous direction.

## **II. Conquering in Sustained Suffering and Death** [Read Heb. 11:35b-38]

"Others" overcame not necessarily by obtaining miraculous feats, but by abiding in Christ even unto great suffering and death. Consider these examples more closely:

1) "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection." [Many among the prophets, consider the martyrs of history and today---can be released if deny the faith; otherwise wives and daughters ravaged...etc]

2) "Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment" [The prophets...etc--not easy to stand alone...much easier to speak 'peace, peace...']

3) "They were stoned"

4) "They were sawn in two"

5) "They were tempted, were slain with the sword"

6) "They wandered about in sheep skins and goat skins (not too fashionable), being destitute, afflicted, tormented.." [the prophets, John the Baptist- lived in the wilderness, clothed with camel's hair, ate locusts and honey, had a small following for a while---lost to Christ, imprisoned by Herod, beheaded on a birthday wish]

7) "--Of whom the world was not worthy (heaven's heroes--think they always felt like that?, read Jeremiah...etc)

8) "They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth" (no cell phones, internet, texting, always threatened---wasted lives from the world's standpoint, where were their white picket fences...etc?)

Brethren, these examples all show individuals who manifested their faith by enduring their suffering and maintaining their testimony even unto death. You think they prayed to get out of their trials and tribulations, or to gain some form of relief? Of course! But they were called unto the task of keeping and maintaining these burdens, and by means of their faithfulness in and by them, they overcame and brought glory to God! These people should be posted on our shirt logos! They are heaven's heroes!

Now brethren, from their standpoint, do you think it could have been easy for them to think that God somehow forgot them? Read the Psalms. They did not always receive prophecies (gaps in between, probably even large gaps). They suffered in anguish, and sometimes in doubts and fears (Elijah), but they remained faithful. They kept to the investment; they determined to finish well by glorifying God in life and in death. And they made it home!

### **Conclusive Words**

How did they do it, brethren? [Read Heb. 11:13-16]--the key that unlocks it all for us!

We will be called to bear unbearable burdens, but let us fix our eyes on Christ, and let us hear the cheering voices of the fathers, who have gone before us. Unbearable burdens are God's gracious gifts to us, and they provide some of the greatest opportunities for us to blare forth the glory of our invisible God, on the stage of this lost, dark and fallen world!

AMEN!!!

Benediction: Hebrews 12:1-2