

# Making Us People We Should Be

*The Book of Hebrews*

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**Bible Text:** Hebrews 11:30-40; Judges 7:1-23

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Well, then this evening we're continuing in Hebrews 11:30-40 which we read a moment ago that we're looking at, and some passage it is, too, isn't it? "Making Us the People We Should Be" is the title. Making us the people we should be.

We've seen that faith and that's what this passage is about, faith, that faith is about believing firmly and with great conviction in things that, strictly speaking, we haven't yet seen. God, who is invisible, well, we believe in him just as verse 27, we looked at Moses last week, that Moses there forsook Egypt by faith as seeing him who is invisible. So God was palpably there, so in some way he was able to see him and recognize God. He did see him by faith, believed he was real, believed that what he was doing was actually in the will of God.

And faith involved us believing about the future, the future which we cannot predict, cannot foresee, unknown to us, unknowable, but of course, all known to God. And whatever he says about the future, even if he doesn't give us as in previous days any specific promise, nevertheless all that he said about himself will be true in the future with the help and guidance and the deliverances that he promises to give to us. Whatever we face, death, life, trials, temptations, that he will provide for us in those situations and we believe that. In a way, that's what gets us out of bed in the morning with a degree of confidence that God will help us through, that he'll find us a passage through life. Not that we see in the future, well, how could we. We're finite creatures, we live in time and space, and the future is unknown. We can't account for the next five minutes, let alone the next five years, but God can and we believe that he will watch over us.

So faith anticipates promises that God has made to us here in the scripture, fulfilled in the experience of people in scripture, of course, but by people in church history throughout the age of the church, and we believe he hasn't changed and we believe he will honor those promises to us as well as individual believers. And we've seen that faith involves obedience, that if we believe what we believe about God, if we believe what we believe about the future and of judgment and the reality of heaven and the reality of hell, that it will affect us in the present. It will make obedience happen. It will enable us to make choices because that's what obedience is, it's making choices. You've got options and you can obey God or you can disobey God. You have an option and that sometimes the

choice of obeying God is costly, dangerous even, and that very much comes out in our passage tonight, doesn't it? But that's what you do, faith looks, sees consequence to obedience. Faith isn't blind. Faith knows there's going to be a cost, unbelievers aren't going to like this, and so it reckons on that, it still reckons that all that God has, all that he's promised, heaven, glory to come, well, that that eclipses any cost that we might have to pay in the here and the now.

So we've been looking at faith and we continue with that here in the passage tonight. We'll be looking in more detail, some of the figures of the past like Abraham, Moses we were looking at more last week. Then my first heading, then, is this: this passage is a review. This passage is a review. In its context it is actually a rebuke. Where it is sitting as it does in this place in the whole scheme of this book is it's actually a rebuke, a rebuke to people who have far more light than any of the names of the people already mentioned or that come through to us in the passage that we just read here, verses 30 to 40. New covenant believers, believers this side of the cross, believers who know the power of Christ's blood and what his body has done for us, far far more than any of these people had, they saw the promise and saw a lot with great clarity that lay ahead. But they hadn't seen it. They couldn't speak of a cross as we can, as a finished work. They couldn't talk about resurrection as something very clear to us because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. They didn't have any of that. That wasn't at hand. They had expectations and promises, these were things by faith that they affirmed and believed and made decisions on the back of that, but they still didn't have those things.

So here are these believers in this particular context, this points in the early church, who had all of the light but were not living anywhere near as boldly and courageously. It's by faith they should have been as those people in the old covenant time and so it's a rebuke to them. It's a rebuke that you should be doing what these people are doing. You should be out there, those promises fulfilled, living in such a way as shows what you really believe. That's how you should be. This is what we see here, faith making us the people we should be. It's a hold that we have upon God that then works something deeper into us and the people that we emerge as.

So it's a very inspiring passage, a very inspiring passage, but it's actually a rebuke. It's actually a rebuke, a rebuke to the readers there and it may come as a rebuke to us as well in our own particular path in this pilgrimage. So this is why at the end of this passage, verses 39 and 40, it's saying, these all, all these elders, Moses, Abraham, Samson, Jephthah, Gideon, Barak, the list could go on, that these all received a testimony. They did it by faith, that they did what God required, that their obedience might have been very costly but they followed through with it and without the light that we have in the new covenant time.

So that was then. They didn't receive the promise, the promise of Messiah. It wasn't for their day. It was a day still afar off because God had arranged it that something better would be for us, and that all of those old covenant believers, all the light that they had was not complete. They were not going to see or be able to accomplish the things, the

perfection, if you like, that we as Christians are able to accomplish with the greater light, the greater power that we have in the Holy Spirit.

So we can see they sacrificed so much and yet lacked the light that new covenant believers have, and so we ought to follow their example. And having gone carefully through the various patriarchs there, the early believers on earth, now the tempo quickens and really, why, this passage goes at a cantor, doesn't it? So many different figures, so many different characters that are just briefly alluded to here that you could do a sermon, couldn't you, on every single one of them. Some by name and others you can realize who it is from what's happening and quenching the violence of fire, the mouths of lions being stopped. Well, yes, we can see in Daniel here and what happened to him and to Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego. But this, really in its context, just refers us back a little bit by way of its rebuke to Hebrews 5:11-14 where he writes, "of whom we have," talking of Melchizedek, "much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing." That's what he's saying, you've become dull of hearing. "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

Now he's given them a bit of a shaking up there and a bit of a wake-up call that they should be doing much better than this. They should be teachers of others, their discernment, their understanding good and evil, their ability to weigh a case and come to a decision, why, they are nowhere and he rebukes them for that. Then Hebrews 6:11-12 which actually anticipate Hebrews 11. Let me read it, and he says, "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." Becoming sluggish and not believing this readily, that they're not living in a way that demonstrates they believe in these things. They're beginning to lose their hold on it and he's saying we should imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. And he's looking forward to Hebrews 11, isn't he, there? You're going to find out those who through faith and patience did inherit the promises. Even though the promises were held out to them still unrealized, they believed and lived in a way that was not sluggish, wasn't slow to learn, slow to hear but was very discerning, very very wise living and very strong courageous people.

So it's a rebuke perhaps to us. This is the cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12:1. We have them here in the Bible as that cloud of witnesses still to us today. They speak to us. How do they find us? Are we in a place of sluggishness, needing the rebuke, needing to actually imitate these who by faith and patience inherit the promises? Are we sloppy or are we urgent?

My second heading: doing great exploits, suffering in trials. Doing great exploits, suffering in trials, and that really is this passage. That's what it's about. So you actually have it in two parts. You have those who did great exploits and there from verse 32 to

verse 35, the beginning of it. Then you have those who suffered great trials, that's 35, the second part of it, through to verse 38, and the trials are described there. But in both, common to both is courage, is boldness. Yet for all that, these are frail people.

You notice the names that are there and each of them there comes over to us as having frailties, as themselves not being totally utterly the finished article. Well, they weren't always the people that they should have been and yet still were able to make those choices, vital choices at those times. Gideon, we read about him, didn't we, a moment back in Judges 7, and Barak, Samson, Jephthah, all of which deeply flawed characters. Weak in many ways. These are the sort of people who out of their weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, who showed great courage and boldness, but at the same time being deeply flawed individuals. Not the finished article. Not the finished product.

So, in a sense, there's a lesson there for us that we're never quite, perhaps, going to be the people that we might hope to be, that this day and this age with superheroes and marvels and what to expect from these sorts of characters and we're always waiting as Christians to feel as invincible as them, as got it all together as these people have. They've always got the right word to say at the right place, at the right time. The put-down here. The funny word here. And wow, and they carry the day with many people. We can think, well, we're going to be that. Well, Gideon wasn't that and Samson was a deeply flawed man, Barak needed the help there of Deborah before he would go into battle, and the list continues. Why, there's David. Certainly his whole testimony deeply deeply marred by what he did with Bathsheba and then to Uriah the Hittite.

So they were flawed people yet still did exploits and they did those exploits where it seemed the opposition was too great. That had you have been looking as a kind of military strategic thinking, you would have looked and you would have said, "Well, I'm sorry. I don't think you've got a chance here. Look at those Midianites, Gideon. Look at all the camels they've got, the chariots that they've got. See how many of them there are. Look at your company. Of course, the way the Lord whittled it down to just 300 in the end, yes, look at what you've got, give up now. Don't even try. No chance on success. No outcome here that we can conceive of you winning in."

Well, that's not what he thought and he trusted God and put faith in him, and even though how can you against 300 fight all of those? But prevailed. God showed him a way through, encouraged him by overhearing a rather anxious, rather fearful camp of the Midianites, that dream that one of them had had, and that barley loaf bouncing down the hill and smashing straight into their tent, and he realized that they're for the taking, that they're already trembling. Somehow they were already fearful, but then with all those lanterns on the hill. All those, there were only 300 of them. As far as the Midianites were concerned there were 300,000 of them and that put them into panic where they're killing each other and so Israel prevailed. By faith Gideon believed that God could perform something that really seemed impossible.

It seemed impossible and that's what we find again and again, don't we, in this passage. There right at the beginning as we read it, verse 30, Joshua encircling Jericho. Could have

read that, couldn't we, from Joshua. We could have followed them those days they had to walk around this impregnable city, this invincible city with its walls, and apparently the last day of it, went around seven times and then blowing their horns with a special blast and they're all to shout and the walls would fall. Well, try that somewhere out there. Is there a wall you don't like? Well, try that then, or rather don't, you know, you'll get arrested or there will be somebody to tip off the police that somebody needs a bit of help here, perhaps you ought to come and find out what's gone wrong with them. That's not going to work, is it? Walls don't fall down like that but they did here because God had said that they would and Joshua believed even though if you're thinking to yourself, priest blowing the horns and carrying the ark of the covenant and us doing it in this particular way for those six days, and the seventh day doing it differently, walk around more often, and then the shout as well as the long blast of the trumpet will work. But it will because God has said it will work and he believed it, believed that that is what the outcome would be and, of course, it was.

There is Rahab too. Well, in a sense, her courage because Joshua showed courage in this because if you're going to do this, surround this city, if it fails, if it fails the word gets out, the King of Jericho is saying, "Well, that's that. These people are fools. Let's go and take them. They're nothing." And the word gets around to all the other kingdoms, "Don't panic. Whoever these people think they are, they're nothing." So a lot hinged on it and Joshua was strong and brave and courageous in how he took that word of God and enacted it, was obedient to it. As was Rahab. She believed what she had already heard about how God had been with these people, and how he had brought them out of Egypt, destroyed kingdoms, slain kings, and now here they were on her doorstep. And the spies, oh, she had been found out housing the spies, she was dead. She was dead. But she believed, "No, it's more important even if I should die that I'm with these people whose God I believe in. I'm siding with them come what may." And thus, of course, she also prevailed by faith, then marries Salmon and ends up then in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ. How amazing. That's her faith and where that led her to.

So we see a host of various judges. Joshua there, we see David, his famous fight against Goliath and how the Lord was with him in that. How could he prevail against this huge giant of a man? But he did because God was with him. And Samuel and the danger that he was placed when he anoints David when he knows that Saul is not going to be thrilled with this, and that Saul might well want to kill him as well as try and kill David. And David, of course, there also living dangerously, having to make all kinds of difficult decisions with Saul on his tail and then other enemies subsequently. But the result when the results are summed up for us here, kingdoms are defeated, alien armies are put to flight, lions there are silenced.

And we think, perhaps Samson but perhaps moreover of Daniel there in the lions' den and the mouths of these lions that were stopped. And then the fire. Well, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, I mentioned them a moment ago and you know there, they would not bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar. And so the fire was to be heated up even more than usual and they were going to be thrown in. So fierce, wasn't it, that those who threw the men in themselves perished. And yet they survived, quenched that fire in that way.

And so these various people who did great exploits, great great exploits, exploits for their God. They weren't suicidal. They didn't sort of rush out as some are prone to do and absolutely make a mess of it because that wasn't what God was requiring of them. No, but that victory that they won, the way against the odds that they prevailed. And God hasn't changed and still that we, well, whatever stand, whatever issues there to the issues of the hour, but the important issues of the hour, always be careful which hills you die on. That's what they say and that's no more true in this time than any other time. But there are victories that the Lord's people can yet win in this secular society and against those in all of their efforts to destroy, undermine the church.

So we must be ready to contest and contend for the faith, to take the battle, at times, to the Lord's enemies, the humanist, the atheist, whoever that it might be, to rebuke and to challenge. Well, that's the exploits and then there's the suffering and the list of those who suffered, well, that is a long list too and we could just have so many sermons of characters from within the Bible and, of course, confining our attention to the Old Testament who suffered because they stood for God and they stood for God when their own nation, their own people against them. They might the king against them. We think of Elijah, don't we? We think of the prophet Micaiah and Jeremiah and how he had officialdom raging against him, and he had the word of God, preached it, and he got thrown into a pit, didn't he, or put in chains, got beaten, and that was the result of that. God prevailed.

And we can see again how Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego would not bow to the king. Pagan king and should have been at least somebody who was supportive of God's people and they opposed him, would not conform to him and were willing to be thrown into the fire. "If God wants to deliver us from that, He will. But even if He does not, no, king, we will not bow to your statue." And so they prevailed.

And it's there, isn't it, that they got deliverance. They got a deliverance, that they did not wait for, as it were, some kind of worldly help to come; that they themselves where it talks about temptation, they were tempted in verse 37. Well, that temptation is to actually back away from their testimony, show their unbelief. "At you, king, we'll bow to your statue, we'll pay homage to you, we will discard our God and idolatry that this would be. We'll make our conscience comfortable with it." But they didn't do that and what did they see? They saw a better resurrection. They saw that if they obeyed God, served him, even if they died, that they would obtain a better resurrection, a resurrection of the just, a resurrection of the wicked. It would be heaven for them and not hell for them.

Well, that's the people that we should be, persuaded of eternity, persuaded of heaven, persuaded that those things which we might find imposed upon us perhaps in the future, things there already, gay marriage, whatever else it is, that cost to ourselves, that cost with our standing in the eyes of others, we'll make a stand on these things. They may become more costly again in the future. But we're on the front foot and that we're ready to challenge. We're ready to be there to speak a case, make a case to the authorities, whoever that it might be, and that we believe God will be with us.

So my third and final heading is: what about us? Well, what about us, are we the people that we should be? Are we the people that we read about here? Could we have fitted into what we're reading, the narratives we're reading? Ah, yes, that's comfortable. Could have done it. Well, could we just have done it? I think we would feel there very inadequate, very small, very fearful besides what we read here. What we remember is said earlier, I went into battle and they suffered not as perfect people but very frail people. Their frailties are recorded for us here in Scripture. They weren't already sort of the oven-ready article but had themselves to battle through their own concerns, their own fears, their own dance. Gideon needing his fleece twice before he could feel comfortable, and then God giving him, then, the option of being able to hear that dream. He didn't know he was going to hear that but he knew there'd be something to strengthen him and followed on with that. Weak yet made strong.

And friends, we might feel very very weak, very very weak but Christianity is not a game. It's not a parlor game. It's not just a little something we do on a Sunday and we say these things and then the rest of the week we're somebody else doing something else. It should carry with us. It should carry forward with us, the people that we are and what we expect of God as we go about our day to day living, whatever that day to day living looks like. It's not a little game, a gentle thing that we can sort of be involved in, be quite friendly and quite comfortable and comforting, in a way. No, it's life or death. It's about eternity. It's about the biggest issues of life and those are the things I hope grab you as I hope they grab me.

So we counsel ourselves here. As you read of those who were strong in these things, it's easy to find faults with people. Discernment websites get a real hammering from some people because they have the temerity of actually calling out false teaching in the church. They don't get thanked for it, get people accusing them of being unloving or judgmental or whatever else that it would be. Well, I think those characters fit a little bit more in with Gideon and Jephthah and Barak and these rather than what we're being told that they are.

And we can excuse ourselves, the pain of separation, the pain of separation from the world, from worldliness and from the various compromises that there are in the world out there. Well, we know God is calling us to do something radical here, to step apart from that. Not to laugh at their jokes. Not to be part of that company and that communion. We can want, actually, the world to think that we are worthy. That's said, isn't it, of whom these people there and, well, whatever we might think we have, we're not yet in sheep's skins and goat's skins and in deserts and dens and caves and it says that of whom the world was not worthy in verse 38, the world that accounted them fools and wanted to kill them. But actually, no, the world was not worthy of them, of all of its emptiness and its pomp and its vanity.

But sometimes we can think, actually, we want to be thought worthy by the world. We want to fit in. We want to be conforming in the wrong sense to the world and its expectations. Remove offenses, "So you don't like that, then we won't do that. You don't like that doctrine, we'll get rid of that doctrine there." And we can be too retiring, too

generous, too kind at times. And at some times there's that place, isn't there, to contend earnestly for the faith. That's what it's all about. It's some bigger issues here and you choose your battles wisely before you engage.

And these were God-appointed, weren't they? And we don't know what lies ahead, dear friends, we don't, but here we can see making us the people we should be. All that we're learning at the moment may be preparation, whatever lies off ahead, gaining discernment in the here and the now may well serve us very very well for future challenges, that we might have future battles we might have to fight, and to make us ready if need be to suffer for the faith.

So making us the people we should be. There's our list of examples. We can go away and in a hurried way read those at our leisure in the Old Testament and draw the conclusions that we should from those things. May God help us do that.



# **MAKING US THE PEOPLE WE SHOULD BE (Summary of Sermon)**

## **Hebrews 11:30-40.**

### **Reading: Hebrews 11: 30-40.**

Faith means that we believe what has been said about things we cannot see, such as the future, because God has spoken those things. Indeed, faith believes in the reality of the being of God, whom we cannot see but we believe He exists (v27). Faith hears the promises which are given about the future and thinks about them as if they are already accomplished and acts in the light of this. Faith therefore means obedience, which itself can be costly and require courage of us in the choices that we make.

#### **1. This passage is a rebuke**

This passage is very inspiring, but it is actually, in many ways, a rebuke. It talks about people who had less light than the people the writer was writing to had (v39), and yet they were more courageous than these new covenant believers were. The example of the Old Testament believers who had not received the promise of Christ fulfilled (v40) put to shame the people the writer was addressing. They should have been doing a lot better. They were not hearing the word properly (Hebrews 5:11-14) and were sluggish (Hebrews 6:11-12).

After looking in more detail at the lives of people like Abraham and Moses, the writer now picks up the tempo and gives us a series of quick mentions of different people from the Old Testament who were the cloud of witnesses of Hebrews 12:1. We have to ask ourselves whether these people and their exploits are a rebuke to us. Are we sluggish?

#### **2. Doing great exploits and suffering in trials**

In Verses 32 to 35a there are the brave exploits of past figures. In verses 35b to 38 are the trials that people endured. Both required courage and both were undergone by people who were frail and made mistakes. They were real people with real flaws.

The exploits were carried out against enemies where the odds of success seemed minimal on the surface. It seemed an impossibility that the well defended city of Jericho would fall to the Hebrews as they circled the city on foot - but it did. Rahab showed great courage in siding with the people of God. So people who trusted in the word of God obtained great victories and overcame great evil. Some of the examples of people who fought against strong enemies and prevailed are Joshua, Gideon, Barak and the other

Judges mentioned. Others were kings like David or prophets like Samuel. Kingdoms were defeated and enemies were put to flight. Lions had their mouths shut and kings were defied.

We sometimes have to step up to the challenge and contest and confront. We may have to take the battle to the Lord's enemies.

Then there are the examples of the Lord's people suffering at the hands of oppressive rulers. These include such characters as Elijah, Jeremiah, Micaiah and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. Some were attacked by their own people and by other opponents of true religion. But they refused an easy option out of their situation because they believed in the future judgment and the resurrection of the just to glory.

### **3. What about us?**

These people are a challenge to us. It asks us about ourselves. These were ordinary people and often weak people. They were not the finished article and yet they still went to battle.

We can be guilty of playing at Christianity, as if it is a nice and comfortable game. We can find fault too easily with those who contend for the faith and can excuse ourselves from the pain of separation from the world. We can want the world to think we are worthy of them and remove offences out of the way. We can be too generous, too retiring, too kind. This passage shows us what kind of people the Lord is wanting to make us into.