

The Witnesses
Hebrews 11:32-40
9/23/2018
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We come again this morning to Hebrews 11 as we finish this chapter. So, this morning, I apologize to you in advance. I am going to read the first couple of verses of chapter 12 as well, because in preparing for this I should have included that not because I plan to preach on it – that's not until next week. But the way to understand these final verses of chapter 11 is to understand what he says as well in chapter 12:1-2. And so, we turn to Hebrews 11:32 – 12:2. So hear now God's Word.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 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.

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated. Of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised. Since God had promised something better for us than apart from us, they might not be made perfect.

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, 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. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Now Father, I pray that you would fill us with the gift of faith that has a hope that cannot be quenched though it is misunderstood, though it is derided, it is a sure hope, a proper confidence, not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ alone. Lord, I ask that you would enable us to escape the modern poison of individualism that would simply have us see our faith as simply being me, myself, and Jesus. Lord, may you help each of us not just to hear individually, but to hear corporately of the people of God throughout history who together walked by faith. And because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, may we also run with a proper confidence because these witnesses testify that You are worthy of our trust. Help us, O Lord, to hear together, to walk together, to witness together the glory of the hope and faith in Jesus Christ. In His name we pray. Amen.

This past June marked three years after gunman Dylann Roof entered the historic Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina killing nine. Much can be said about that event. Much can be said about what happened as a result of that event in the state of South Carolina. But I was reminded of it this week because the *Today* show decided to do a piece on forgiveness and gave wide berth to the only three survivors of their hope and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Remarkable. Hoda Kotb traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, and sat in Second Presbyterian Church just a few blocks away from Mother Emanuel. They sat in the sanctuary and she sat down with Felicia Sanders, whose son Tywanza Sanders

26 years old, passed because of his gunshot wounds. Polly Shepherd and Jennifer Pinkney, whose husband was both a state senator but also the pastor at Mother Emanuel.

I commend you to simply go and Google search it. It's worthy of your watching it. But what I was struck by were the words of Hoda Kotb as she set up the interview. She said the following, "I feel like I'm around strength. I don't consider you to be victims. I consider you to be teachers, three people who could teach us something. We watched you go through pain, we watched you on your knees, we watched you hug your community, and then we watched what I think is a miracle. Just two days after the shooting, you forgave Dylann Roof." As the rest of the interview went on, they talked about how that forgiveness was a choice, a choice which was not their first inclination. Anger, the incredible rage of wanting vindication and retribution, and yet what was televised on national television, these three women sat in a room with a judge and then Dylann Roof on a television. And fighting through tears, they said, "May the Lord have mercy on your soul. But I forgive you."

And they talked about how forgiveness is a process, how each day brings with it different challenges. But then they stopped in the middle of the interview and they said, "But the reason why I'm able to forgive is because I am forgiven." And wonderfully, one of them said, "It's because it is the second commandment, to love your neighbor." And they talked about how that choice of love enabled them to be free of the poison of hate. Although difficult, they were teaching us how to forgive each other. These three women are three wonderful witnesses. They are witnesses to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ in their lives. They are witnesses to unspeakable horror. And they are witnesses to the power of the love of Jesus that is the absolute most unusual, unreasonable, crazy thing we could ever imagine that has with it that could only be divine grace that would enable them to say: because I am forgiven, I choose to forgive. I need witnesses like that, how about you?

And this is what we are called to do with this passage. If there is any other part of this letter that is first and foremost a sermon, it is this passage because he says, "And what more should I say, for time would fail me to tell." And then he goes through this long chain of historical events from the Biblical testimony of what these folks were doing. And then in 12:1, he says to us, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin." Now I will tell you, we will talk about that next week. But before we get there, before we can even begin to look at it, we need to be reminded that we are not here because we were just ingenious, or thoughtful, or reasonable, or more faithful, or more gracious, or more merciful. No. We are here because of the people we read about in this passage. Because God by His providential will sent forth His promises, and because of His inscrutable nature, He decided to call a people who were so unworthy of His grace to Himself – so weak, so small – that He would make a mighty nation through whom He would send the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. And through that gift, we call Him Lord and Savior.

So, we are here because of these witnesses. And just as surely as I needed those three women in Charleston to remember how to forgive, so we need to give ourselves to this Word, not because of its particularity – all of the historical nuances – but because of what it means in mass. Look with me, if you will, at the outline. We see the varied experiences of these witnesses, but also strengthened resolve as a result. The varied experiences and the strengthened resolve.

Let's look at the varied experiences. The historical passage that is given to us here beginning in verse 32 continues all the way through verse 38 and covers a period of time that is collected for us from the Book of Judges all the way through what is called the Maccabean period, the intertestamental period between the Old and the New Testaments. And what is given to us here is a beautiful description, as we can see, beginning in verse 33-35 the stories of victory. We hear of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We hear of the return from the dead of Elijah and Elisha. What it tells us here is that they by faith, which is a gift – that is, the Lord demonstrates that He is so worthy of our trust, He is so sure that he will fulfill His promises that we can trust in Him. And it is only by trusting in Him can we face great odds. And they go back, and he tells us the story of the victory. And oh, how we love to read of the victory. It needs no explanation because it is so perfect in its eloquence. It is worthy to hear again, "who through

faith they conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight.”

Ladies and gentlemen, we are only 25 miles north of the greatest art museums in the world, and they will have for us the paintings of the stories that this passage tells us. I encourage you, take this passage, go to the museums, and watch how the painters throughout Christian history have depicted these victories. It is awesome. Particularly as you see Daniel in the lion’s den, and you sit there on a bench and you open your eyes and it’s just breathtaking. Their victories are wonderful. And yet, it was also alongside incredible moral failure. These were folks of clay feet. They, too, were full of sin. Moments of acting in faith and seeing the realized promises, the victories, and yet, also relying on themselves and falling into sin. And yet God in His gracious promises met them again, and they received mercy and kindness and renewal. So, the victory isn’t just what they accomplished because of God’s power at work in them by faith, but also, they receive forgiveness and grace. Alleluia, that the Lord does not remove the low ebbs of their lives.

But we are not content in simply reading about the victories. Don’t we want that? We want the victory, we want the conquering? Although I disagree, I heard someone recently pray that this world is horrible and putrefying. To a degree, I understand theologically. And yet, I also recognize that God is giving victory, victory of seeing people coming to Christ in numbers we’ve never imagined in places like China and the global south, many who are even sending missionaries to the west.

What we see is the Lord is still on the move in small and in big ways. And yet, it is not just victory. We also have to deal with the agony. And here, it simply is a reminder that when the Lord says, “Follow me,” it is not merely into victory. It is also into great suffering. “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” is great until you then have to recognize that promise when you’re in the midst of suffering, when you’re having to face ridicule, when you’re having to go around destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. And still today in 2018, there are teachers who claim to be teachers of the Word who make it sound as though Christians who are destitute and afflicted and ridiculed and suffering are somehow not living the Christian life. That is heresy because the Scriptures tell us that it is a part of what it means to follow the Lord, to walk by faith. It means, yes, there are seasons of victory, but also bitterness and challenge. It doesn’t mean that the Lord is not faithful. It means, oftentimes, we see that faithfulness, the sweetness, and honey of His grace in the midst of great trial.

And so, it is given to us. It is attested here for us to be reminded they were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with a sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, and destitute, afflicted, mistreated. “Of whom the world was not worthy,” meaning they were willing in faith and following the Lord that the world did not recognize what it was doing in the mistreatment of them. That’s what it means. It means that what they trusted in enabled them to go through and face suffering of the like which I have never personally experienced. But thanks be to God, they did. And God in His providence and sovereignty has proclaimed and retained for Himself a list of witnesses through whom the Word of God was proclaimed, and written, and secured, and safeguarded, and passed on; and that is what we have in our hands.

But it is a reminder from the lips of the preacher of Hebrews to his audience and to us. We will see victory as some of these witnesses did, but we will also see agony. But the truth remains. “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,” meaning they hadn’t yet seen all that was going to happen. They didn’t see the fulfillment of all the promises, yet, they believe in the One who promised it.

Do you feel beleaguered if you are a believer? Do you feel beleaguered in your faith, discouraged, doubting, wondering? Are you in the trial, or are you experiencing victory, or is it a mixture of the two depending on if it’s a Monday or a Tuesday? Perhaps the word of Horatius Bonar in one of his hymns when he writes these words, “No sweeter is the cup, nor less our lot of ill. Twas tribulations, ages, since.

‘Tis tribulations still. No slacker grows the fight, no feebler is the foe, no less the need of armored try, of shield and spear and bow. Thus, onward still we press through evil and through good, through pain and poverty and want, through peril and through blood still faithful to our God and to our Captain true. We follow where He leads the way, the kingdom in our view.”

“Still faithful to our God and to our Captain true. We follow where He leads the way, the kingdom in our view.” If you are not a believer, what I just read may seem novel, run of the mill. It maybe sounds sort of circular in reasoning. But let me establish this. I believe that with the great apologists of the 20th and 21st centuries, I believe that with Christians throughout the ages, that there is no other way of understanding Christianity unless it is centered on faith in Jesus Christ recognizing that Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, Him buried, Him resurrected, and Him being our Savior through whom we receive forgiveness for our sins and salvation unto eternal life is a stumbling block to the Gentiles. If you are not a Christian, you look at the proclamations of this Word and even what I’m saying as foolishness. It is because what we try to do – and even Christians try to do – we try to make Christianity reasonable by another standard outside of Christianity itself. What do I mean?

Lesslie Newbigin, a great 20th century missionary, wrote these words. He says, “The reasonableness of Christianity will be demonstrated insofar as it can be, not by adjusting its claims to the requirements of a pre-existing structure of thought, but by showing how it can provide an alternative foundation for a different structure. To look outside the Gospel of Jesus Christ for a starting point for the demonstration of the reasonableness of the Gospel itself is a contradiction of the Gospel, for it implies that we look for Jesus elsewhere than where He is.” What does he mean?

He means we cannot take who Jesus Christ is and what He has done, what these three women have responded to and by faith in facing great evil, what these witnesses have done that are described for us in this passage – we cannot take them and their faith in the Lord God, take it out of its historical relational context, and make it sound reasonable by the world’s standards because it lacks logic why you would give yourself for something you cannot see personally demonstrated in its fulfillment. You say you believe and you trust in One that cannot be seen. You say you believe in a Holy Spirit, Father, Son. You say you believe in a Trinity, we can’t even find that word in the Bible. Please, demonstrate for us by the rules of worldly logic why Christianity is worthy of belief.

I’m not suggesting that Christianity doesn’t have logic and it is not full of reason. The issue is, we can’t start outside of Christianity. We must start inside. And the inside always begins with the testimony of human beings who were once walking this way, suddenly their lives are changed, and they say they have faith in the one and only God of Israel and His promises to be true and gave themselves to it. And priests of the One who would come, who would be the Redeemer, who would be the Son of God, and would give themselves and their very lives for the proclamation that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, came and died. The reasonableness, the logic of Christianity, the logic of the Gospel begins only in it, not outside it. You have to work your way inside, then go out. It’s not that it lacks logic or reason. It’s that it’s a reason and a logic which is a completely different foundation.

What is that foundation? Do we trust in ourselves or do we trust in the Lord? That’s the first logic. Do we trust in ourselves or do we trust in the Lord? The passage tells us that by faith, by faith in the Lord, they did these things. This is what is left for us, and that is, we must realize that this was given to us as a gift because it is meant to strengthen our resolve. Look at verse 39. Verse 39 says, “In all these, though commended through their faith, they did not receive what was promised since God had provided something better for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” That set of verses, 39 and 40, is one of those examples, particularly in Hebrews because he was using a very elevated form of language, that when you try to translate it into English it makes it sound like he’s saying: the Old Testament people, they had one way, but we the New Testament people of God have a different way. That is not what he’s saying at all.

What he is saying about them is the same thing he says about us and his audience. When he says, "And all these, though commended through their faith did not receive what was promised" is similar to what he says in 10:35 when he says this, "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward, for you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." And then it says, "for a little while, and the coming One will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." What he's saying is his audience has not yet received the fulfillment of the promises, nor did the Old Testament. Also, in chapter 13, we read of this in verse 14. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." The whole reason why he's urging them to endurance is the very same reason why he's giving us stories of their endurance. They walked by faith not yet seeing or receiving all that was promised.

So is the same with us. But notice what it does say. There is something that will happen together, and if we don't look at it and try to work it out, it may not make sense to you. Verse 40, "Since God has provided something better for us," that means us and them, "that apart from us, they should not be made perfect." Meaning they, this great cloud of witnesses, await for the revelation of Jesus Christ at His second coming. They are awaiting for that day just as we are awaiting for that day. And when that day comes, we all will be made perfect as one, the body of Christ forever and ever.

That is what is being declared here. It's not saying they had one way and we have another. No. None of us have yet fully received all that is promised. We live in the already and the not yet. If we are believers, we have received forgiveness through Jesus Christ alone, but we have not yet been made perfect. We are works in progress that await the day of the revelation of the Son of God who said He would come again and take us to be with Him and the new heavens and the new earth. And when that happens, we, along with all this cloud of witnesses, will all be made one perfect in His sight and will reign and be with Him forever and ever. We long for not the city we live in, we long for the city that is yet to come, the great heavenly city, the great Jerusalem that will be the center of worship in the new heavens and the new earth.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that we live in a strengthened resolve along with this great cloud of witnesses first with a future that is promised. We have to live in the tension between the already and the not yet, which is why he says in 12:1, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings." Meaning all these things are true, therefore, we must face where we are and seek to grow by grace. That said, there is a future promised.

Secondly, our strength is resolved and strengthened because we have a faith which is proven. That is, our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ relies not on triumphalism that everything is a picture of victory, but we also avoid defeatism, that it's all the story of suffering and destitute nature. It is a mixture of watching the Lord maturing those who walk by faith to trust in Him, and there are days of victory. There are days of answered prayer where we say, Alleluia, amen. And other days, we pray, how long, oh Lord, how long? But it's because our faith is proven because of this word. We can't start outside of Christianity and the Word to prove it. We must start here. And this is given to us and given to you and to me to encourage us that our faith is proven because we have a great cloud of witnesses who have come before us. It's not about you and me and Jesus. It's about the hand of God bringing about a people, a nation, a revelation of his Son drawing us together at Columbia Presbyterian Church and around the world to proclaim the glory of His name. Not us, but to His name be the glory.

But finally, it is also our strength is given greater strength because we are given a fidelity that he says, if we are faithful, we will be vindicated. We will be vindicated. And that's what is meant here in verse 40 when he says, "Since God has provided something better for us that apart from us, they should not be made perfect." Again, do you feel the brokenness of your own sinful nature? Do you find yourself feeling the brokenness of the world and sometimes you feel like you're falling into defeatism or discouragement? This Word is meant to encourage us that the end of the story is not failure, it is not

brokenness, but justice, righteousness, and glory. That we fail one minute, and we walk by faith the next. But there will be a day when we will see him perfectly, and we will know just as sure as we are fully known. We will gather together on that great day, and there will be a feast of the lamb which will be like a great wedding feast when the church of Jesus Christ from around the world and throughout all the centuries will be declared and revealed, and we will go to be with our groom the Lord Jesus. And He has set a table for us that is beyond imagination. The Bible can only call it like a wedding feast, but it's going to be even greater because the Bible is in and of itself talking to us in only ways we can now understand. It is beyond description. It is beyond our knowing.

But it says that if we seek to walk by faith in faithfulness, in faithful obedience on our knees, on our feet, whether we're working at our jobs or at home or we're in between – whatever we do, if by faith we seek to walk in faithfulness, our faith will be vindicated because Christ will come again and make all things right. And He will say to His church, well done good and faithful servant. And so, we are here together with this great cloud of witnesses, and we say, Lord, make us a people who will be a witness to the future. By your grace and by your power, enable us to walk in faithfulness. Next week, we will look at what that is. Help us to walk in new obedience. Help us to say no to ungodliness. Help us to begin to stand and say no to the sinful patterns which we say we feel conquered by, but the Lord says, I have given you my Spirit. I have given to the church the Spirit. And by Him, we can say no to sin, not perfectly, but today we can begin to walk in new obedience. We can put aside the weight, all the weights that we seek to add to the Christian faith that have nothing to do with it.

This is what He calls us to, church. This is what He's called His people to. May you be encouraged – I hope you are – that the great cloud of witnesses are praising the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses and they're saying, run, run by faith. We have gone before you, and He is faithful, and He will do it. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for this, your Word. Father, I ask that you would give us your Holy Spirit and the power of your Word to walk by faith as did these witnesses. That we would walk and not faint. That we would rise up like wings of eagles. That we would run to you in dependence and in faith to walk this life that is often acquainted with suffering and trial, but at times, the sweetness of victory. But you tell us to follow you just as you told these saints of old. Lord, may you say to your church here at Columbia Presbyterian this morning again, follow me. And when you do, you tell us that you give us the gift of faith, not by our understanding, not by our strength, but by you alone. Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.