

“An Anchor for the Soul: The Faith of Sinners”

Hebrews 11:29-40

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 15, 2016

As many of you know I spent nearly 20 years in the printing, graphics and advertising business and over the years I worked on my share of brochures advertising all kinds of goods and services, real estate, travel, and politicians. If you've ever been to a car dealership you know how impressive new car brochures can be. There are beautiful photos of the cars along with explanations of the amazing features, the benefits of owning it, and the reasons that car is better than the competition.

So now imagine putting together a slick brochure for the Christian faith. What would you include in it? What are the features and benefits of Christianity? You would certainly start with eternal life. That's pretty important. And you would probably include the benefits of the relationships with other Christians. Even if you have no natural family, as a Christian you are part of a better family—the family of God. What else? How about things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

So far so good. Now, how many of you would include torture or poverty or imprisonment. You wouldn't want to leave out beatings and insults and being sawn in two, would you? If you're like me you probably wouldn't want to include those kinds of things in the brochure.

Hebrews 11, though, is kind of like a brochure for faith. Hebrews, remember, was written to encourage a group of Jewish Christians, probably in Rome, who were beginning to face some persecution for their faith. And so all through Hebrews we have seen promises of something *better*. Verse 40 says that “God has provided something better for us.” What God has promised is better than anything the world has to offer.

As we have looked at Hebrews 11, the so-called faith hall of fame, we have seen how faith has empowered people to do amazing things. Beginning in verse 33 we read that 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, and became mighty in war.” Abraham left home, trusting God for a land and a family. Noah built a ship in the desert. Moses challenged the most powerful man in the world. But their accomplishments are not the point, their faith is, a faith focused on something *better*. We are reminded each time how these saints trusted God's word and the effect it had. In each case faith made the difference. They had the “assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.”

One of the challenges we can have when we read passages like these is that we begin to compare ourselves to the people we read about in Hebrews 11. We think, “I'm not like them. They were super saints. I'm just a regular person trying to live one day at a time.” Or maybe you think, “I'm just not good enough to be like them. I've done too much wrong. I don't have that kind of faith.” Some days you may even find yourself struggling to even believe in God.

We read this last part of Hebrews 11 and we see the great faith of prophets like Samuel, Daniel, Elijah, and Elisha. We're reminded of the great victories of King David and Gideon and Barak. This morning I want us to look even more closely because when we do we begin to see something else in this list that may be an encouragement to you. Instead of seeing people with super faith we see people with super weak faith. We see people who are in fact sinners.

To help us understand what I mean let's just take one of the men from this list, Gideon. Gideon lived during the period of the Judges in Israel. This was the period after they had settled in the Promised Land and Joshua had died. Israel was led by a series of judges whose job was to decide disputes between people and lead the people in battle. But there were problems.

The Israelites began to abandon their faith in God. A common refrain throughout the book of Judges is, “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.” Judges 2:14 says, “So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.”

But even in those faithless times God used certain individuals to deliver His people from their enemies. Judges 6 tells us that one of those enemies was the Midianites. God allowed them to attack Israel for seven years. We’re told that whenever Israel would plant crops the Midianites would come and take their produce. This was their punishment for disobeying God. Often times God’s punishment for our disobedience is simply that He allows for human nature to run its course. Sort of a natural consequence. Our punishment is that we miss out on God’s divine blessing in our lives right now.

So God sends a messenger, an angel, to Gideon. The angel says, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” Gideon, who is commended here in Hebrews 11 for his great faith, responds by saying basically, “Really? If God is with us why is all this bad stuff happening to us?” Anyone ever feel that way? Anybody ever wonder why, if God is supposed to be taking care of you that bad things keep happening?

The angel tells Gideon to go and fight, that he will defeat the Midianites. Gideon, the man commended for his faith, then says, “prove it.” Gideon brings out some food and the messenger tells him to put it on a rock. When the angel touches his staff to the food it’s immediately consumed by fire. Gideon recognizes that this was the “angel of the LORD.” You would think that would be enough proof. But then he asks for another sign. He puts out a fleece and says, “God, if you want me to go fight, in this morning make this fleece wet but the ground dry. And God does it. And again it’s not enough proof. The next night he says, “this

time make the ground wet but the fleece dry.” And again God does it.

The point is that this does not sound like great faith! It sounds more like fear or doubt. Yet Gideon is held up as an example of faith. The stories are similar for Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. The Bible goes into great detail about their sinfulness. John Calvin commented on this passage: “In every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible. Nevertheless although faith may be imperfect and incomplete it does not cease to be approved by God. There is no reason, therefore, why the fault from which we labour should break us or discourage us provided we go on by faith in the race of our calling.”

There are three things we can take away from this. First of all, the key to understanding this is the Greek word for faith, *pistis*. It’s the word that’s been used all through Hebrews 11 to describe faith. But it can also be translated as *faithfulness*. It’s the same word used in Romans 3:3, “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the *faithfulness* of God?”

Let’s try plugging in “God’s faithfulness” in place of faith in our passage and see if it makes sense. “By *God’s faithfulness* the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land.” “By *God’s faithfulness* the walls of Jericho fell down.” “Through *God’s faithfulness* [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.”

Friends, that’s the good news of the Gospel. It’s by *God’s faithfulness* that you and I have any hope. It was God’s faithfulness that sent Jesus and it was by His faithfulness that He went to the cross in our place. Our assurance of things hoped for – eternity with Jesus – and our conviction of things not seen – the reality of heaven – is rooted in our confidence in God’s faithfulness and Hebrews 11 shows us that since God has been faithful in the past then we can trust that He will be faithful in the future.

The second thing we see from today's passage is that we only need a little bit of faith. Jesus tells us that we only need to have faith as small as a mustard seed. The issue is not the quantity of our faith but the *object* of it. If your faith is in this great God who is able to save you and is faithful to save you, then you can rest assured that He *will* save you. You can be certain.

Third, and finally, we see that sometimes God works in supernatural ways to deliver His followers from suffering and trials. He delivered the Israelites from Egypt by parting the Red Sea. He gave them victory over Jericho. He gave Elijah and Elisha the power to raise people from the dead. Even today God works to deliver people from persecution and pain, saving their lives. But we also see that there's no guarantee.

Sometimes God works in our trials by giving us the faith to endure to the end. Because we don't fully receive the "better" thing promised to us in this life. We receive it when Jesus comes back for us. But it's the hope in that promise that allows us to endure torture and persecution because we know that it's only temporary and what's permanent is so much better.

Let me leave you today with one final quote from John Calvin about how this hall of faith in Hebrews 11 can inspire *your* faith: "A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?" Think about that.

Amen