

Perfection

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[0 : 00] What we're doing is finishing off the 11th chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, and I will read it first, and then I think we'll just pray and then go at it and see what can be found out.

Hebrews 11 and verse 29, can you all find that? By faith, the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith, Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies.

And what more shall I say? For the 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, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life.

[2 : 12] Others suffered mocking and scourging 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, and ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

And therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Well, this is the end of the twelfth chapter, the end of the eleventh chapter of the epistle.

[3 : 29] And it's an important chapter for a number of reasons, and I'd like just to go through it quickly with you so as to show you some of the things that I think may prove helpful to you.

And in order to do this, let's just pray. Our God, we very much need that you, by your Holy Spirit, will illumine your word to our hearts, and illumine our hearts' understanding of your word, so that in the particular circumstances of each of our lives, the reality of those promises which are implicit in this passage for us may be made available to us, and we might appropriate them in the circumstances of our lives.

We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Now, the first thing that I want you to see is, by faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same thing, were drowned.

One of the, I think, laws of spiritual life is that when two people do the same thing, it's not the same thing.

By which I mean, when the Israelites, by faith, went into the Red Sea, the Red Sea opened up for them and they went through. When the Egyptians, by presumption, went into the Red Sea, the Red Sea closed on them and they were drowned.

[5 : 25] And a lot of times, I think, Christians get into trouble because they do what somebody else did. And when somebody else succeeded in it, they get clobbered doing the same thing.

And so that Christian faith is not a matter of following the leader in terms of the other person, the other person's faith, but it's a matter of developing your own faith and walking in obedience to that. I spent the weekend wishing I was Michael Green and that I had the ability to communicate that he has to communicate. And I know that if I tried it, I would fall flat on my face because I can't do it.

And very often, we try presumptuously to do what other people do, thinking that what they do is what's important.

But it's not what's important. What they do has to be the product of what they believe or of their faith. And you have to be careful not to follow another person's faith presumptuously.

[6 : 42] In other words, thinking that the same thing will happen to you. And yet people, I mean, I think that's fairly clearly taught here, that we are to live by faith, not by presumption.

We have to live in terms of our own faith, not in terms of somebody else. So look at that first. It's faith, not presumption. And it's quite a different thing because like I presumed I'd get all this on here but didn't quite.

That's the first thing to look at. The second thing to look at then is, by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

I had a lovely illustration of that when Helen Houston was last here. And she described the work in Nepal where there are no Christian missions independent of one another.

[8 : 06] They all have to work under the United Mission to Nepal. And they have worked for years and years very faithfully there.

And though it is a Hindu state and Christianity is forbidden, many, many people have become Christians and many Christian pastors have been thrown into prison because of it.

And she described how the whole sort of Christian church in Nepal is an underground movement. They're all there.

But the government tends to think that there's a cluster of them there and an insignificant cluster there and an insignificant cluster over here and another insignificant cluster and one person here and one person there.

And when Helen was going back to Nepal last year, there was a movement abroad among the Christians in Nepal that they should all come together in a central city to celebrate Christmas and their faith in Christ.

[9 : 18] And she said the big question is that is it time to blow the trumpets or should we just keep walking around the city and wait till God says it's time to blow the trumpets that the walls may come tumbling down.

And certainly that is a picture of Christian faith that you are to go on and on and on and on and only when the Lord says blow the trumpet, declare yourself, are you to do it.

And so it's a powerful picture of carrying on patiently with courage and endurance until such time as God says, now blow the trumpet.

Lots of us want to blow the trumpet on the first day or the second day or the third day, but day after day after day they were required to walk around until after seven days.

Then they blew the trumpets and the walls came tumbling down. Powerful picture of faith. The third picture of faith here is Rahab the harlot.

[10 : 32] And she's an embarrassment apparently to everybody that a harlot should appear in this catalog of saints.

And I don't know if your sensibilities are offended by it, but here she is. And she, against the reason that she appears here, and is simply because when the two spies came in to spy out the promised land and they came to Jericho and they went into Jericho, they were foreigners and everybody could see they were foreigners.

And the only person who could receive them was Rahab the harlot and she received them into her house and she hid them there. And the presumption of all the people around was that these two spies, Joshua and Caleb, like all the men that had gone into her house before, were there to purchase her favors.

And instead, they were able to hide there when the authorities came looking for them. Rahab hid them under some flax that was drying on the roof of her house and then let them down over the wall and they escaped.

And then when the army, when the posse came that was looking for them, Rahab very bravely said, they went that way. You know, and in fact, they'd gone that way.

[12 : 23] And so, she honored the spies in faith. And so, she was in due course honored that when Jericho was destroyed, she and all her family were saved.

And it's interesting, you see, that this woman then appears as one of the ancestors of Jesus Christ in the genealogies of the first, of Luke and Matthew.

So, it's a very interesting story of this woman and how her personal courage and faith allowed her to do this.

Well, then he's overcome by the, you know, he's been very careful. He's gone carefully through this catalog and he's dealt with all the heroes of faith thus far.

Remember the catalog of men who had lived by faith and women and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and he brings it right down to these three, to the Red Sea, Moses at the Red Sea, then Joshua before Jericho, then Rahab the harlot, but now the floodgates open and you get a whole series of things crowding one in upon another and he begins to compound them and put them down in a hurry and so he picks on Gideon and these were the judges.

[14:03] You know, Israel came out, came into the, into the land under Abraham and first they appointed, well, they were a family so there was the head of the family, then they appointed the judges, then they appointed the kings and then God appointed David from among the kings.

But you get this list of the early judges of Israel who were Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, they were four of the judges and the stories of them are written in the book of the judges. What I, what you can do very easily is you can probably get several weeks of Bible studies out of this particular passage simply by looking up the references to these people in the footnotes or in the center column of your Bible and they will tell you where to read the story of Gideon and where to read the story of Barak and where to read the story of Jephthah and where to read the story of Samson so that you could pick one a day and you could spend your, you could spend several weeks working through the 11th chapter of Hebrews just by picking up the footnotes and reading through about each of these persons that is mentioned here.

So, Gideon was a judge, Barak was a judge, Samson was a judge, Jephthah was a judge, David, you can read two books really on him, 1st and 2nd Samuel, most of, and part of, the whole story of Samuel appears in the first book of Samuel and then they add on the prophets and there were writing prophets and preaching prophets, Elisha and Elijah being the great prophets of history and then you get the whole catalog of prophets from Isaiah to Malachi in the scriptures and the whole story of their life and so you get this, this catalog of, of people who are examples of faith by the way they lived their lives and then he tells how they lived their lives and he picks up the kind of thing that happened in verse 33, they conquered kingdoms, they enforced justice, that was particularly the work of the judges because they were in a kind of jungle where there was no order, no law, everybody was living,

I suppose, in their, in their tribes and in their families and these men conquered the areas and, uh, established law and order which is what it means by enforcing justice.

[17:27] Uh, they received promises that God had made that they would be given the land and promises for strength, these men received them, they stopped the mouths of lions, that's part of the story of Daniel, part of the story of Samson, part of the story of David, they quenched raging fire which was the story of the three, of the three, uh, men, uh, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace of Daniel, they escaped the edge of the sword, uh, Queen Jezebel was going to put Elijah to death by the sword and he was able to defy her, they won strength out of weakness, remember Samson was a picture of weakness in his blindness in his old age and he asked for strength and was given to it, they were mighty in war and they put foreign armies to flight and much of the books of Kings and Chronicles record those events, women received their dead by resurrection both under Elijah and under Elisha, there were two women whose children died and whose children were restored to them by the prophets, that's one kind of resurrection, another kind of resurrection is spoken of in the next verse when it says that, uh, some were tortured refusing to accept release that they might rise again to a better life, people like Uriah the prophet who was put to death for his faithfulness in bringing the word that God had given him to bring and he was put to death, they accepted death, which I think is a very important part of this story that it says that, that there was these two kinds of resurrection, one which was restoring to life and the other which was resurrection to a better life, then it goes on and says, others suffered mocking and scourging, chains and imprisonment, and these are the stories of the prophets, and for most of them you will find in your Bible direct references to events of that order which these may be referring to.

They were stoned. It's, there's a, there's a tradition that Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt. They were sawn in sunder which was a form of execution, I think, putting a man in a hollow log and then cutting the log in half and that Isaiah was presumed to have died in that way, the prophet Isaiah, though there is nothing in scripture that says that, but that's a story that's been around for a

very long time, that he was one of those who was sawn in two.

They were killed with the sword, went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering over deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

And so the whole spectrum of human suffering is portrayed here for us by people who in the midst of it all held on in faith.

Now, I think this chapter has really meant a great deal to me in preparing it to talk to you because of the fact that there is no limitations, that it has forced on me in a new way and renewed and encouraged me very much in the faith simply because it says that no matter what happens, faith is all you have.

[21 : 47] no matter what overtakes you, no matter what circumstance comes to you, faith is all you have. And I am at that point in, you know, when I found it in trying to help other people who constantly talk of faith as being I trusted God that this would happen and it didn't happen and now I don't trust God anymore.

Well, the faith that we're pointed to here is the faith in which you trust God no matter what happens. No matter whether you win the 649 lottery or not, you know, no matter what circumstance overtakes you, you trust God.

that is the bottom line. And that's the kind of faith that is spoken of here by these people. Destitute, naked, in chains, being sawn asunder, being stoned, being tortured, dying in poverty, hunger, and dirt.

Nevertheless, in, with faith undimmed, the kind of reality which is portrayed here.

And that's what happened to these people. And the whole of the Old Testament is a kind of, is summarized in these verses as being a catalog of faith.

[23 : 35] faith. And that's why when you are in desperate circumstances yourself, you will find so much comfort in the reading of the Scripture because there you come in touch with that faith, that faith which doesn't let go.

It holds on no matter what happens. And it's an encouragement to us to hold on. We, we so much live our lives in, in the prospect of good and happy events overcoming us or overtaking us.

And when difficult things overtake us, we don't know which way to turn. And this tells you which way to turn. You hold on in faith, in faith in, in the purposes of God.

Now, this, this, this, this, this concludes then, and this chapter concludes by saying, all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised.

And if you go back to the very beginning of chapter 11, verse 2, it says, having said, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

[25 : 07] For by it the men of old received divine approval. And then you get down to verse 4, where it says, Cain, he received approval as righteous.

Well, that's what this attesting is. It's the attesting to these people that they were attested by their faith.

That is, that they were convinced, they had the approval of God. They didn't care what other people might think or what other people might conclude.

They knew that they were in that relationship to God in which they were attested. I had a friend come to see me not very long ago who had a deep sense of guilt about some events that had taken place in his life some months ago and that had all but destroyed him.

And he had never shared these with anybody and he talked to me about them. And felt that he should share them with me. And I was able to share with him the fact that just in those circumstances in his life, God has the last word.

[26 : 34] We don't have the last word. It's not that we can sin bigger than God can forgive. or we can fail worse than God can ever succeed.

In other words, that we can do more to upset the purposes of God than God can do to upright our lives and set them going in any direction.

I read this morning from Ezekiel. He said, the righteous man, if he depends on his works of righteousness, they are corrupted and he is condemned.

And he sort of turns the whole order of society upside down by saying, the righteous man is condemned, and the wicked man, if he turns from his wickedness, lives.

The righteous man who takes pride in his righteousness dies. The wicked man who repents of his wickedness lives. That the whole order is entirely different because of the central reality of God and our learning to put our faith and trust in him.

[27 : 52] man. And so it says, all these well attested by their faith did not receive what was promised. That is, they lived by faith in a promise that they never received.

They're like that verse about Moses in last week's talk where it says that he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

And you see, I don't think that there is anything left to us except to go on believing.

I don't think there is anything else. There is no other promise except to go on believing. And the secret of our lives is not the attainment of any particular goal.

or any particular state of blessedness. But it is that we go on believing. We go on trusting.

[29 : 03] You don't have to. Nobody's going to make you do it. But you either choose to do that or you choose not to. know, I had a day last week in which this is a petty thing by comparison with this catalog, but everything seemed to have gone wrong and I couldn't take it anymore and I just felt overwhelmed by the circumstances of my life.

And yet I, because of my sort of reading in Hebrews, I realized that in that situation where you are sort of tempted to give in to despair and hopelessness and do some dramatic gesture to sort of defy the world around you and to tell them all where they can get off, which wouldn't have accomplished anything, that all I, the only course open to me was to say, okay, if all this works out in the worst possible way, if all my fears are realized, if all my despair suddenly opens up before me and I am engulfed by it, if every terrible thing that I can conceive of happens to me, do I go on believing or not?

And you can't read this chapter but to discover that you go on believing, you go on trusting, no matter what happens.

That's the bottom line and that's what I think we have to shift towards that bottom line. We've got to, we've got to work on that basis that no matter what happens, it is our privilege to go on believing.

Now the world may think that that's utter foolishness, sin. But ultimately it is the only final wisdom.

[31 : 08] It's the ultimate in truth, it's the ultimate in wisdom, that we should go on believing in the God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Do you see that line there in verse 38? It says, of whom the world was not worthy. Well, you know, you can turn that statement around and say, of whom, and that these people were worthy of something better than the world can offer.

Just by reversing that statement, it says, these people were people of whom the world was not worthy. You reverse that to saying, therefore, they were worthy of something more than this world can offer.

And that's the nature of man, that in the course of our human life, you can experience the whole. And this is the book of Ecclesiastes does this for you. If you want a little exercise in doing it, read through the book of Ecclesiastes, and the book of Ecclesiastes ends up by saying, is that all there is?

[32 : 31] He explores everything, every aspect of human existence, and he ends up by saying, is that all there is? That's the conclusion that man comes to.

And that's why most people, when they get to be 40 or 50 or 60 or something, have a profound look of depression on their face, because they have come up against the question, is that all there is?

And what this chapter says is that no, that is not all there is. In those circumstances, you can be attested for your faith, you can be a person of whom the world is not worthy, but that isn't all there is.

There is something infinitely more that makes it worthwhile going on believing. Not believing in yourself, because you can be relieved of that kind of faith very easily.

And if you haven't been yet, I'm sure that God in his mercy will bring you to the place where you will be, relieved of that kind of short sighted faith. It's believing in him, and that's why these verses, I think, have to go into chapter 12 to bring them to a proper conclusion.

[34 : 02] When in chapter 12 it says, therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, now they are witnesses not in the sense of a football crowd watching you play out your part of the game.

They are witnesses more in the sense of a signpost which says, that's the way. So God has given you Gideon to say, that's the way, and Moses to say, that's the way, and Jephthah and Barak and Samson and David and Samuel and women who received their children and all these people who died and lived in caves and were dressed in skins, all of them saying to us, that's the way. This is the crowd of witnesses by which we're surrounded. You're not in a huge barren landscape where you don't know what direction to go. You are part of a progression in history in which there is centuries of men and women who have lived by faith and whose lives are recorded for you to read that as you read them they will say to you, that's the way.

Therefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses of people saying, that's the way, then it comes the hortatory subjunctive of, it is so characteristic of Hebrews, those two words, therefore, let us.

It's not a singular thing, it's a plural thing. We're to go in company with one another. We need to encourage one another. You could make another Bible study by going through Hebrews and just underlining all the lettuces.

[36 : 09] It says, because we are compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer 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.

Well, these point the way Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And, you see, he did what he's asking us to do. He went to the cross in obedience to the Father. You know, you may, I don't know if you feel you've heard that too often, but that's what Jesus' life was.

It was the life that was given to him in order to face death for you and for me. And he, in a sense, opened up a way for us to follow, enduring the cross and despising the shame.

He wasn't afraid of being obedient to God. And we, by faith, are not to be ashamed of being obedient to God either.

[37 : 53] We are to live by that faith. Well, there you have Hebrews chapter 11 in eight easy lessons.

And that's the end of this noon series for now. I'd like you to keep the mission in mind, which starts Sunday morning.

morning, I suddenly have a sinking feeling in my tummy about Sunday morning because we're going to mess up people's usual Sunday morning services and people are going to get upset because it doesn't follow the ancient routine of Anglican liturgy.

So pray about that, will you, that people will be able to see it for what it is, and that is just a different kind of worship for a special kind of purpose, in order that people who may be comfortable with the familiarity of our worship may be able to experience something new, not with a view to getting irritated and angry and upset by it, but with a view to understanding that sometimes we won't open ourselves up to things God may want to say to us in different ways and through different people.

So I do want you to be praying for the mission and planning, if you can, to attend it, and it'll run the first three Sunday mornings in March and the two Wednesday nights in between.

[39 : 42] And then there'll be a series of home Bible studies that will go on from the end of the mission till Easter, and then right after Easter, Kathy Nicol is going to pick up on this Wednesday noon series and start a new series then, which I hope you will mark in your diaries.

good enough? Let me just pray. Good enough? Father, we ask that in your grace and by your mercy, that our names may be added to that wonderful list of people who live by faith, not faith in ourselves, but faith in you and your loving and eternal purpose.

Grant us this grace, we ask in Christ's name. Amen. Acts to Christ? That's you, Christ? Amen.

Oh, God, and I go kilowatt moon, I tell you you that these things have smelled around and should past things you right?

And and , so now what are things out and in my good Hussein