
Faith to Be Strong and to Be Weak

Hebrews 11:30-40

Introduction *I have been helped and have relied heavily on John Piper's message on this text. It was preached on 8/10/97 at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His manuscript is available on-line at DesiringGod.org.*

What do you think the Christian life really is like? People, both believers and non-believers often have very distorted view of the Christian life. Many of the modern distortions are centered on faith, what it is and what it produces. So, we have a tremendous task in our preaching. We must help people understand what faith is and what it is not. And we must take up the task of our author as well, that is, call you to keep on believing with true, God-given, Holy Spirit enabled faith.

As one preacher said on this, "Preaching the word of God aims to bring our views of God and his ways more and more into line with the truth. We do this for unbelievers so that you can embrace Christianity on the basis of a true picture of it, rather than a distorted one; and we do it for believers so that you can live your lives on the basis of true views of God and his ways, rather than distorted and deluding and discouraging views."

One of those views common today is that a life of faith will bring health, wealth and prosperity. Another, is that by confessing our faith, saying what we believe, we bring into existence the thing we believe for. Both of these are dangerous and delusional. Neither square with the life of Jesus, Paul or the rest of the saintly sufferers through the Bible. Both will lead to terrible discouragement and difficulty. They cannot and will not produce the kind of saints this text is challenging and calling for us to be.

Now, we do not come to these paragraphs as though they were dropped in on us like a block of ice from a roof of melting snow. It has contours that are shaped by its context. Faith has been shown, first in principle and then by illustration, to be the essence and evidence of that which is believed. It takes what is invisible and sees it by trusting the One who reveals it and rewards those who believe. This functional description of faith comes as a challenge to people who are tempted to intentional sin and tested by intensive suffering. They are being called on to endure, to believe in God and His promises with persevering patience.

So the preacher, the author, is brining us to the thundering exhortation of Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, lay aside weights and sins and run with endurance." So how will we hear and understand these verses so that we will do exactly that? How has the author designed what he is saying so that these paragraphs motivate us for the "therefore" and its exhortation? He does so by illustrating three important principles that illuminate faith for us.

Now, again, this is not faith in faith. It is not the horrible view of faith today that is really just magic. This is tough times with trusting people who keep on regardless. This is faith in God and what He says so powerfully transforming that they are commended.

The Saving of God's People

(v.29-35a)

What we find here is that God moves to save His people by faith. Through their believing in His Word in an obeying way, He moves through both miraculous power and through ordinary providences to deliver His people. Now notice that I am not using the word "save" here necessarily in a soteriological sense. This is broader. It involves saving from sin and it involves saving from harm and disaster.

Through His Power

What I see here is that God sometimes does works of miracles through His people's faith. Now, I know that many say this is no longer true. I am not personally among that number. I believe that God can and sometimes helps His people who call on Him in believing prayer through unusual intervention or interruption of the ordinary way things work.

Now don't fret that I have gone off this week past for a conference on exposition and in some way have been captured by error. I like to say that I believe that God still does miracles; I don't believe in miracle workers. God still heals; I don't believe in healers. Further it is important to say that we must always keep a Biblical definition of miracle. A miracle is a supernaturally caused and extraordinary interruption of the natural way cause and effect works. When we misuse the word to describe something surprising or unexplainable, we both trivialize where and when God actually works and falsely extend the miraculous to that which is not.

Now what were some of the miracles alluded to here? There is the dividing of the Red Sea (verse 29) and the falling down of the walls of Jericho (verse 30) and the shutting of the mouths of lions when Daniel was in the lions' den (verse 33). There is the quenching of fire by Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, when they walked through Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (verse 34), and the resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath (verse 35a). These are true miracles. God intervenes with His power and the people of God were delivered or rescued from danger or death.

Through His Providence

God also moves on behalf of His people through faith by the ordinary working of His providence. R.C. Sproul calls this the "invisible hand of God." Here God is working secretly and quietly to arrange ordinary cause and effect to send deliverance to His people. It might be evident that God is at work, but there is no miracle. It is here where we live day by day. Here is generally what we pray for and how we pray believing. We know that God is able to do miracles and that He is also sovereign over the flow of time and history. He is able to arrange our deliverance, our help in time of need.

Now what are the providences in this paragraph. Well, the author refers to Rahab not perishing because she had heard of the power of the God of Israel (Joshua 2:9-11) and cared for the Jewish spies (verse 31). He points to David conquering kingdoms and establishing righteousness (verse 33). He reminds us of Elijah escaping the sword of Jezebel (verse 34). He highlights Gideon being strengthened in weakness (verse 34); and to others putting foreign armies to flight (verse 34). These are the working of providence through the faith of those helped and delivered.

So here is one motivation to lay aside weights and sins and run with endurance. When we believe His Word, God can and will come to our aid through both His miracles of power and His moving in providence.

The Sustaining of God's People

(v.35b-38)

Next, we find that God sustains His people through faith. That is, He does not always deliver us from suffering, but rather sustains us through suffering by faith. Now this is the important other side of faith. It does not always get us out of hardship and hardness. It does not always bring a powerful or a providential intervention. But it can and does sustain us in the midst of the most horrific suffering.

So, true faith in God is no guarantee of comfort and security in this life. True faith in God sustains endurance and perseverance through all these kinds of miseries. It is by faith that "others were tortured . . . and others experienced mocking and scourging, etc." All this terrible hardship and suffering is embraced and endured by faith.

In the Midst of Death

Now I am struck by a couple of things that this kind of faith produces. Notice that in verse 35, while being tortured, God's people refuse to recant (accept release) with a faith's purpose of rising to a better life. In other words, when being burned and sawn in two and stoned and tortured and electrocuted, they leaned towards the resurrection by embracing a martyr's death. So they refused to draw back, to abandon faith in God. So they endure even to death through faith.

In the Midst of Destitution

But, there is a worse fate than death here as well. They were chained, imprisoned, destitute and degraded. Frankly, most of us, if we are not going to be delivered by the power or providence of God, would wish for death rather than living this way. But God gives them a sustaining faith so that even though they wandered about homeless living in the most desperate of life situations, they will not go back.

Now a great challenge to faith in these kinds of situations is to see the worth of the suffering. But God here in the midst of it clearly gives His divine sanction to it. He says, the world was not worthy of them. They are not going through all this because God is punishing them, but because God is demonstrating His great glory through them. And the world is not worthy to even see the greatness of God through the suffering of His people. This is a needed article of saving and sustaining faith: God makes what we are going through worth it even when the world cannot understand it.

Now all thinking people have a problem. Because it is quite frankly true that we want delivering faith. We want God's powerful or providential intervention for our help. We would rather not have to face destitution or death. So what is the point of having faith if it doesn't deliver us and only sustains?

What makes the difference?

The Sanction of God's People

(v.39-40)

This is an important question for us. We must endure by faith whether we are delivered or not. So what determines whether God moves powerfully or providentially for us or whether He sustains us through to the end?

God's Commendation

First, let's not be confused into thinking that God was displeased with them in some way. No, they are approved by God. Their faith has God's stamp of approval in both sets of circumstances. Those delivered must not think that the deliverance is the mark of God's special favor. Those not delivered but sustained must not think their lack of deliverance is the mark of God's disfavor.

Second, faith is not the determining factor. All these – the delivered and the sustained, are commended. Their faith is commended. So it is neither the quality nor the quantity of their faith that is making the difference in their situation. This is terribly important in the face of modern thinking about faith. A commended faith may receive and it may not. So what is the difference?

God's Determination

It is God's sovereign determinative will. God simply is choosing to save or sustain as is pleasing to Him and as suits His purposes. It is the decision of a sovereign, good and wise God who determines what He purposes for the sake of His people.

Further, at least in their case, that purpose involved us. God was moving in redemptive history to provide something better. That is, God is inaugurating something better than deliverance from suffering or being sustained through suffering. He is in the way to providing the wonder of no suffering so that we can all enter into it together.

So we will not say to people, "If you had enough faith or the right kind of faith, then these things will not happen to you." We say rather, "Believe that God is able, trust Him to determine what is best and endure by faith even if it means destitution and death." Whether you live or die, God is able to take care of you. Trust Him. Lean toward eternity with belief.

So as one preacher said, "Ultimately, it is God, and not we, who decides when and how we die. He has his purposes. They are hidden from us. And faith means, we believe they are good... God is better than what life can give us and what death can take from us"

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

God delivers by faith. God sustains by faith. God determines which is best for our good and His great glory.