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O For A Faith That Will Not Shrink

The chapter and verse divisions we find in our bibles are an invaluable organizational tool, but it is a worthwhile exercise to occasionally ignore them when reading through an epistle to try and get a sense of the structure of the argument the author is building. Certain chapters have been abstracted to the point that you may be forgiven for thinking the Apostle Paul, in writing to Corinth, decided to take a break from his teaching on spiritual gifts to expound on love for a while. We have

another example of this in the latter part of the Letter to the Hebrews. Chapter 11 is aptly called by many editors “Heroes of Faith,” for it defines faith, then illustrates it by the lives of those figures with whom first century Hebrew Christians would have been familiar. However, one should not overlook how it fits in with the grand theme of the book, namely: do not backslide.

Indeed, much of the energy of the epistles is devoted to the theme of not returning to the ways in which we walked. Where Hebrews differs is in how directly it appeals to a Jewish audience. To summarize the letter, Jesus is set forth as the ultimate messenger, the ultimate prophet, the ultimate priest, and the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore nothing at the temple or in the synagogue holds any value for you, as they were only copies of the heavenly things to begin with. And what will prevent us from turning aside? Our faith.

How does our author define faith? Hebrews 11.1 calls it “The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This is a beautifully poetic turn of phrase, but verse 6 is where the author puts it in plain terms. “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11.6) Some of our founding fathers, notably Thomas Jefferson, subscribed to the Enlightenment idea of Deism. They believed that God exists, but is not in the business of rewarding those who diligently sought him. This is not the image of God we get when reading the scripture. In fact, if you want to get this view, you must excise God from His word as Jefferson did.

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Hebrews 11:6

Another way to understand faith is in contrast to sight. Our author says of the patriarchs “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the Earth.” (Hebrews 11.13) There will always be a gap between what

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we believe about God and what we can know for sure, and this is by design. If God wanted to remove faith from the equation, it would be within His power to speak to each of us directly and remove all doubt. However our faith marks us as strangers and pilgrims on the Earth, searching for a better country. Jesus may be our sacrifice for sins, but that does not mean we are not required to sacrifice our confidence in flesh, which is what we can see and feel, in order to serve Him.

There is a further aspect to faith. James explicitly says in James 2 that faith is active. The writer of Hebrews states it implicitly with the lives he uses to illustrate faith. Noah not only believed that God would bring watery judgment on the world, but he also built a boat. In the Genesis account we read

For Noah, faith did become sight. He saw the flood...

that there had been no rain on the Earth. So Noah had to grasp the concept of rain, and the idea that there could be enough of it to cause a flood, and then trust in God's promise of buoyancy. For Noah, faith did become sight. He saw the flood he had warned us of and had prepared for, but the same would be true for us all. One day Christ will return and faith will become sight, but just as with Noah, the time of preparation will then be over.

Abraham was promised three things: a son, blessings for all the nations of the Earth through his offspring, and the land of Canaan as a possession. Of all those things, Isaac was the only one he would

ever see. It would be hundreds of years before his descendants would possess Canaan, and still longer until through his seed all nations would be reconciled to God. For most of us, if a friend says they'll meet you for dinner at 6:00, but they expect you to arrive at 2:00, we know what we would do. We would show up at 5:45, or 6:15 if we were feeling ornery. Abraham didn't do that though. He didn't tell God, “I'll wait here in Ur until you're ready to make good on your promise,” he lived and died in faith as a nomad in Canaan, knowing that whatever life and riches he had in Ur couldn't compare to the promise of God in Canaan.

Moses had a choice to make as well. We don't truly know how well positioned Noah, and Abraham were in their homelands, or what they were leaving behind, but with Moses we know he was important and wealthy, being brought up in Phar-

Jesus is presented as the ultimate example we can look to.

ah's household. However we read: “By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, for he looked to the reward” (Hebrews 11.24-26).

Rahab told Joshua's spies that all of Jericho feared the Lord. They had heard what had happened to the kings on the other side of the Jordan. That sounds like they believed. We may go as far as to say they believed and trembled. However when they compared themselves with the Amorites, perhaps they stilled their fear, reminding themselves that the Amorites didn't have the walls of Jericho. Rahab had that same belief evidenced by fear, but she also had that second crucial part. She believed that God rewarded those who diligently sought Him. She also recognized that the means to save herself and her family was before her, and she would not get another chance. So in that city of simultaneous wickedness and belief, she alone let

her fear guide her to positive action that secured her a place among our great cloud of witnesses.

Jesus is presented as the ultimate example we can look to. He is “The author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12.2). He is our brother in suffering. The first to die, but also the first to rise.

The beauty of the roster of the faithful found in Hebrews is that we can all find someone with whom we identify. Our examples run the gamut of wealth and position, of moral strength and frailty, yet they all plainly declare by their actions that they sought a homeland, and they had to forsake the one they had to seek it. This was not lost on the writer as he leads into chapter 11 with this exhortation: “But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.” (Hebrews 10.39). For the original audience, there was a real temptation to draw back to perdition; a promise of ease and safety if they would only renounce Christ. They could return to the synagogue, their old community. They could have their sins forgiven by the shedding of animals’ blood again at the temple. What the writer wants to drive home is that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin. We can no more return to our old life than Noah can return to the antediluvian world, or Rahab to the ruins of Jericho.

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Chapter 12 is a warning to let the examples given gird the reader as persecution is surely coming. We are told to reframe persecution as the chastening of the Lord, the price of sonship. And finally we are told to beware of profane people like Esau. By my count, 18 individuals are named (including Christ), and many more implicated in the examples of faith, but only Esau is singled out as an archetype we should be wary of. Why might that be? The clue is in the text “... who for one

morsel of food sold his birthright.” (Hebrews 12.16b). If you were to go to Genesis 25 and re-read the account, you would find that Esau came in from the field hungry and asked for some of his brother’s stew. Jacob bargained for Esau’s birthright, and Esau said “Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?” (Genesis 25.32). That attitude has no place in the Church. We have been given a great birthright. We are sons and daughters of God through Christ. If we are to resist to the point of bloodshed, and the only escape offered by man is to recant our faith, our attitude should be: “I am about to die, this birthright is all to me.” For the person of faith, all man can do is hasten us on to our true homeland.

Marcus Brannon
Fresno, CA

Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

“For yet a little while,

And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.

Now the just shall live by faith;

But if anyone draws back,

My soul has no pleasure in him.”

But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Hebrews 10:35-39

Perseverance Pays Off

When someone asks if I play golf, I often respond by saying, “No, I’m a Christian.” Those statements are true - I am a Christian and I don’t play golf. But if it sounds like I don’t play golf as a result of my faith, that’s not true (though I do have fun with my response). I know there are many fine saints of the Lord who enjoy a round at the links.

Ben Bender of Zanesville, Ohio is one who enjoys golf. He took up the game at age 28. In April Ben was playing at Green Valley Golf Course and hit his first-ever hole-in-one. Before he reached the 18th hole, Ben walked away from the round and from the game. At age 93 he decided “the Lord knew” that this would be his final round, and gave him the prize he had always dreamed about. (The pain he felt in his hip was another reason he decided it was time to give up the game.)

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The aging process brings with it a gradual diminishing of our physical abilities. I’ve seen that with my love of hiking through the mountains. Bender, however, inspires me. He shows that if one keeps pressing on, it’s possible to reach one’s dreams.

Caleb is one whose example in old age gives inspiration. He approached Joshua with a request: “... here I am this day, eighty-five years old. As yet I am strong this day ... Now therefore, give me this mountain of which the Lord spoke in that day ... It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall be able to drive [the enemy] out as the Lord said” (Joshua 14:10-12).

85 years old, but ready to take on a mountain! The text goes on to say that “Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb ... because he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel” (Joshua 14:14).

The Bible has many examples of men and women who accomplished great things despite being advanced in years. Moses was 80 years old when he took on the task of leading Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 7:7). Abraham and Sarah were given a newborn son at the ages of 100 and 90 respectively (Genesis 17:17). Noah was 600 years old when he

entered the ark which he and his sons had just completed (Genesis 7:6)!

On the other end of the age spectrum consider young David. Though men much older and stronger cowered before the giant Goliath, David was not afraid: “I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts” (1 Samuel 17:45). That faith gave him the advantage.

Do we not have the same advantage? Paul’s confident declaration strengthens us: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). If Christ is with us, He will also empower us to do what must be done (Ephesians 3:20). We simply have to have faith in these promises - and persevere!

Timothy D. Hall
LightGrams, May 17, 2018

Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

James 5:9-11

Reflections of the Psalms: Psalm 12

The first thing that “jumps out” in Psalm 12 is the first two words, “Help, Lord” - what a short, simple, and yet complete prayer! Have you ever had “one of those days” and the frustration, tension, or whatever got so bad that all you could think to say was “Help, Lord”? That was what David must have been experiencing.

We often admire a person whose prayers are smooth, polished, and eloquent; but in those two somewhat desperate words, David speaks volumes! We can visualize the thought of danger, helplessness, isolation, and many other dark feelings. It pictures in the mind a small child lost in the dark. That child is not worried about smooth delivery or grammar; all that little one can say is “Help, Daddy!” That’s probably close to what David was feeling when he wrote those words.

As we look at the conditions David was describing, the reasons for his despair become clear. The faithful and true followers of God seemed to have vanished. A man’s word was no longer his bond. Lying was the rule and not the exception. “Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception.” The attitude of the day was, “...we will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips - who is our master?” The people that are described in Psalm 12 were far from God and centered upon themselves.

If we did not know better, we could be persuaded that Psalm 12 was written today rather than centuries before the birth of Christ. As we consider David’s inspired words, the question arises, “How can people read such passages and still believe that the Bible does not apply today?” To the faithful, the proof is so clear. Often, Christians today see the same types of situations that David wrote about.

The answer to that question is found in 2 Corinthi-

ans 4:4, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers.” The influence of Satan is constantly being felt in the world. Many people are not concerned about their relationship with God. Their response to Jesus Christ and the Gospel will be anything from apathy to hostility.

Even some people, who profess to be Christians, practice a double standard in terms of how they live their lives. On Sunday, their words and actions are very proper, but during the week, there seems to be no difference between them and a person who is light-years away from God. The popular attitude of today is stated very clearly in Psalm 12:4 “...we will triumph; with our tongues; we own our lips - who is our master?”

The growing ranks of the ungodly should bring sadness to a Christian. The incredible gift of salvation is being offered to the world, yet most will not accept it. The picture shown in the first four verses is grim but, as David often does, the scene shifts from the situation in the world to the Lord. “Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise”, says the Lord. “I will protect them from those who malign them.”

At times we may be oppressed or needy, and we wonder if ANYONE, especially the Lord, knows what we are going through. The answer is a very clear - YES! The Lord knows what we face. He also knows what we SHOULD have faced for Him! The Father knows the needs of His people, and He does take an active hand in our lives. We may not see it, but God is continuously working in our lives to change us, to strengthen us, and to protect us.

David described the maliciousness and lies of the world, but he also wrote in verse 6, “... the words of the Lord are flawless, like silver refined in a

furnace of clay, purified seven times.” In this verse, David compared the word of the Lord to the process of purifying silver. In David’s time, the process of purifying silver was the most severe type of purification known. It involved the repeated passing of the silver ore through the furnace until every spot of impurity was burned off.

The word of God has that kind of purity. In any world or society, there will be lies and deceit. Sometimes the days seem to grow darker. What is always pure and true? What can we trust? Shakespeare wrote, “Beware the promises of kings.” By painful experience we often find the promises of the government, the reassurances of banks and insurance companies are false. What place is there in this society for a man or woman that tries to live a

good, ethical, moral life?

But the Word of the Lord is pure and true. His promises are certain. His warnings are clear. Our salvation comes from our being joined to the incarnate Word - Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection the Way is open to salvation. The Word of God is the light that will show us the path, and will illuminate the dangers on our journey. Stay focused. Pray for those who are lost. Be alert to opportunities that will come. Avoid the traps of the world, and when you feel surrounded or discouraged, don’t hesitate to cry out, “Help Lord!” for He is here!

Jim Shelburn

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Trusting the Invisible God

Faith—the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. As Christians, we believe, trust, and have faith in the one true God whom we have never seen—the God who sent His only Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins, so that by holding fast to this faith, we may have eternal life with Him in heaven.

But our faith is not blind. We see evidence of God beginning with creation itself. God spoke the universe into existence, creating everything out of nothing. The complexity and intricacies of the world point to an all-knowing Designer—the ultimate Engineer. It is beyond reason to believe such detail could have occurred by chance.

Believing that God is the Creator forms the foundation of our spiritual faith: He is in control of our lives, and He keeps His promises. This foundation is the same one upon which the “Heroes of Faith” in Hebrews 11 built their lives. Their examples encourage us to trust God’s plan for us and to hold firmly to His gift of salvation through His Son.

Like those heroes of faith, we too are called to remain steadfast in obedience and close in our relationship with God—even in seasons when we do not feel His presence. He is always there, working for our good, as long as we love and trust Him.

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