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Hebrews #35

The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Days of the People of Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11:29-40

I wasn't able to see the movie that came out a few months ago, but I do remember when the book first came out in 1972. I'm talking about *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. If you haven't read it, you should. This one excerpt will give you a good sense for what it's about.

"I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

At breakfast Anthony found a Corvette Sting Ray car kit in his breakfast cereal box and Nick found a Junior Undercover Agent code ring in his breakfast cereal box but in my breakfast cereal box all I found was breakfast cereal.

I think I'll move to Australia.

In the car pool Mrs. Gibson let Becky have a seat by the window. Audrey and Elliott got seats by the window too. I said I was being scrunched. I said I was being smushed. I said, if I don't get a seat by the window I am going to be carsick. No one even answered.

I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

At school Mrs. Dickens liked Paul's picture of the sailboat better than my picture of the invisible castle.

At singing time she said I sang too loud. At counting time she said I left out sixteen. Who needs sixteen?

I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

I could tell because Paul said I wasn't his best friend anymore. He said that Philip Parker was his best friend and that Albert Moyo was his next best friend and that I was only his third best friend.

I hope you sit on a tack, I said to Paul. I hope the next time you get a double-decker strawberry ice-cream cone that the ice cream part falls off the cone part and lands in Australia."

Now, what does this have to do with the men and women of Hebrews 11? ***Sometimes it is easy to be intimidated by them rather than encouraged.*** We read this chapter and can easily be overwhelmed by the remarkable lives they led. Their righteousness seems entirely out of reach for you and me. Their humility puts us to shame. Their faith, above all else, makes them seem almost super human. It's as if we are reading about a special race of aliens, a different class of people from you and me.

We say to ourselves: "There's no way that any of these people could have had a life remotely similar to Alexander's. Certainly *they* would never have had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day! After all, wouldn't their faith have *elevated* them above the normal struggles and obstacles of life? Wouldn't their faith have *delivered* them from the sort of frustrating circumstances that seem to plague ordinary people like Alexander and like you and me? Wouldn't their faith have *insulated* them against the attack of their enemies and protected them from disease and death? Wouldn't God, as a *reward* for their faith, have *guaranteed* that they would never suffer lack or go without fashionable clothing? Wouldn't their faith have *assured* them that they would always live in a nice, four-bedroom, three-bathroom, home with a two-car garage and plenty of food on the table?"

Well, no. The people of Hebrews 11 undoubtedly experienced great faith but they were also people who encountered opposition and suffered persecution and were the object of scorn and ridicule and endured physical and financial deprivation, some of whom were tortured and eventually slaughtered for their faith in God.

What we must never forget is that these people weren't just people of great faith. They were also people guilty of **great failure** as well. They were sinners, just like you and me. Life wasn't for them a carefree walk down the yellow brick road on the way to some heavenly Oz. May I remind you that for all his faith in building the ark, Noah got stone cold drunk! Abraham twice lied about who Sarah was in order to save his own skin. Jacob was known as the deceiver and is perhaps most famous for having stolen his older brother's birthright. Moses committed murder. David committed adultery and murder. And Samson's illicit involvement with Delilah has been the subject of more than a few Hollywood movies.

What I'm trying to say is that even though these men and women experienced triumphant faith throughout their lives they were not spared from suffering plenty of terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days. And when they did, ***it wasn't because their faith had faltered***. It wasn't as if they prospered when they had faith and then suffered when their faith weakened. ***It was precisely in the midst of great faith and by means of great faith*** that they suffered intensely, and are here in Hebrews 11 commended for living the sort of lives that provoked the enemies of God to treat them with such disdain.

So let's look closely at this closing paragraph in Hebrews 11 and take note of the various ways in which faith is manifest and what faith both does and does not do.

The relationship between faith and the miraculous (vv. 29-35a)

Let me remind you of what Paul said in Galatians 3:5. He asks this question of the Christians in Galatia: "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" The obvious answer is: God works miracles when we hear the truth of who he is and what he can do and what he has done and our faith is strengthened. Through that kind of faith God is pleased to bless us with the miraculous.

We see several examples of this in vv. 29-35.

First, there was the miraculous parting of the waters of the Red Sea and the deliverance God granted to the people of Israel, at the same time the Egyptians were swallowed up and drowned (v. 29). These people had to have been utterly terrified as they stood at the edge of the waters and looked back to see the on-coming armies of Pharaoh. It was, as our author says, “by faith” that they crossed over on dry land. God had promised them deliverance and a safe journey into the promised land. It remained for them to say, “Yes, all external circumstances and obstacles to the contrary, we are going to believe that God meant what he said and will come through on his promise to us.”

What caused the parting of the waters? At the most basic level it was the power of God. But the biblical text also says it was the east wind. Yet here we are told it was the “faith” of the people of Israel. Let’s put these together: God caused it by employing the east wind as the means to accomplish his purpose; but if the Israelites hadn’t stepped out in faith nothing would have occurred. The Egyptians went through the same physical motions as the Israelites but they were drowned. The reason is obvious: they lacked faith.

Second, it was by faith that the walls of Jericho fell down (v. 30). On the face of it, nothing seemed more absurd or foolish than for grown men to march around a strong fortress for seven days, led by seven priests blowing rams horns. What a silly way to conduct a military campaign! Try to imagine the ridicule they endured. How embarrassing this must have been. Once again we see three factors converging: the ultimate cause was God, the instrumental cause was their marching around the walls and the blasting of rams horns, but the key that unlocked and released the power that brought down those walls was their faith that God would be true to his word and would act on their behalf in defeating their enemies.

I once heard someone make the distinction between *four kinds of faith*. There is, first, faith that *receives* (as in our experience of salvation). Second, there is the faith that *reckons* (when we count on God to do something for us, as we saw in Hebrews 11:19 – “considered” = “reckoned”). Third, there is the faith that *rests* (that is, it waits with confidence in God). And then there is faith that *risks* (the faith that impels us to step out in defiance of all odds and trust God to do what we know he can do). What Joshua and the people of Israel gave expression to at Jericho is the faith that risks.

Third, although not overtly miraculous in nature, the faith of Rahab was remarkable for several reasons. *(1) She was a woman!* In the ancient world women were not highly regarded in terms of either physical or social influence. Yet when it comes to faith, there is neither male nor female!

(2) *She was a prostitute!* Even someone as lowly and defiled as a harlot, when she turns to God in faith, can be the instrument of great accomplishments. **(3) *She was a foreigner, a non-Israelite.*** But what mattered to God wasn't the blood in her veins but the faith and confidence in her heart. Let's never forget that Rahab was the great, great, grandmother of King David! Jesus descended according to his flesh or his human nature from Rahab!

[At this stage our author realizes that he can't simply continue listing all the people who displayed robust and triumphant faith, so he breaks off in v. 32 to mention six individuals whose exploits of faith spanned the period from the settlement in Canaan to the early monarchy. These names are but a random sampling of the many who could have been cited.]

Fourth, this is an interesting collection of individuals (v. 32). Gideon delivered Israel from the tyranny of the Midianites when he led a meager 300 into battle against multiple thousands. It obviously wasn't military prowess that won the battle but his faith in what God could do when his people step out in faith. Barak was a military leader that God used to deliver Israel from the Canaanites and their general, Sisera (see Judges 4-5). We all know of Samson who defeated the Philistines (Judges 16:23-31). Jephthah delivered Israel from the Amorites. David and Samuel and the prophets are lumped together (the latter may include Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah).

And what did they do by faith? The list of their achievements is given in vv. 33-35a.

They ***"conquered kingdoms"*** (v. 33a; this would be true of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David).

They ***"enforced justice"*** (v. 33b; i.e., they established just and righteous governments; see 1 Sam. 12:3-5; 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 10:9; 1 Chron. 18:14).

They ***"obtained promises"*** (v. 33c; this likely refers to God having made promises to men such as Gideon and David and their faith and confidence that he would come through on his word).

They ***“stopped the mouths of lions”*** (v. 33d; a clear reference to Daniel and his experience in the lion’s den; see Daniel 6:22).

They ***“quenched the power of fire”*** (v. 34a; a reference no doubt to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow down before Nebuchadnezzar’s statue; it required considerable faith for them to step into the fiery furnace; after all, they made it clear that they didn’t know if God would spare their lives or not; it ultimately didn’t matter: what mattered was the loyalty and devotion of their hearts to Yahweh).

They ***“escaped the edge of the sword”*** (v. 34b; this could refer either to certain victories in battle or escape from execution).

They ***“were made strong out of weakness”*** (v. 34c; this could easily apply to all those noted above, as faith is, by definition, the confession of weakness and one’s reliance on the God who has power; it might even be a veiled reference to David’s slaying of Goliath).

They ***“became mighty in war” and “put foreign armies to flight”*** (v. 34d; this was true throughout Israel’s history and may also include the Maccabean resistance to Antiochus Epiphanes in the 2nd century b.c.).

Fifth, there is in v. 35a one final miraculous event that is traced to the faith of God’s people: ***“women received back their dead by resurrection.”*** You will recall the widow of Zarephath whose son was raised from the dead by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17ff.), as well as the son of the Shunammite woman who was raised by Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-36).

Now, those are the stories we really like to hear! We want to have the sort of faith that God responds to with supernatural power and deliverance and healing and resurrection!

But we must never forget that men and women ***who had just as much faith*** as Joshua and David and Daniel endured a whole lot of ***terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days!*** And that brings us to the second truth about how faith operates.

The relationship between faith and suffering and martyrdom (vv. 35b-40)

We enjoy reading Hebrews 11:1-35a. It's encouraging to hear of the glorious exploits of men and women of faith. That strikes us as entirely reasonable. Of course God would bless and resurrect and shut the mouths of lions and deliver from the executioner's sword those who have faith.

But what about those who suffer unimaginable pain and mockery and imprisonment and torture and go without food or clothing and eventually are killed? What about them? ***Did they suffer these things because God was punishing them for lack of faith?*** Is this what happens to people who don't trust God and put their hope and confidence in him? No! ***Having true, lively, energetic faith in God is no guarantee that you will experience comfort and security and health and wealth in this life.***

Don't misread this passage. Here in v. 35b our author ***doesn't*** say: "And some [who did **not** have faith] were tortured and suffered mocking and floggings, and even chains and imprisonment." We know the people in view in vv. 35b-38 also had robust and righteous faith, and that for three reasons.

First, note closely that the phrase "through faith" in v. 33a governs everything that follows. It was "by faith" or "through faith" that some suffered mocking and chains and stoning and death itself. There is no break in our author's argument where he moves from describing faithful people to describing unfaithful ones. They are all characterized by faith.

Second, these who suffered are the ones, according to v. 38, "of whom the world was not worthy." In other words, far from suffering these horrible things as punishment for their lack of faith, they are men and women who are of such stellar and superior faith and holiness that the world does not deserve to have them in their midst. How could it be said of them that they were of such remarkable holiness and godly character that the world doesn't deserve them if they were lacking faith?

Third, notice how v. 39 opens. It says, "And ***all*** these, though ***commended through their faith***, did not receive what was promised." The "***all these***" is obviously a reference to everyone he has just described in chapter eleven. He doesn't say, "And only those whose lives turned out to be prosperous and healthy and famous were commended through their faith." No, even those who

barely had enough to wear and to eat and drink, even those who were persecuted and tortured and mistreated, ***even they*** are “commended through their ***faith***.”

So let’s look briefly at what some of these God-fearing, faithful men and women suffered.

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life” (v. 35b). If they had wanted to escape, they could have; but they “refused to accept release.” All they had to do was recant their faith, deny God, renounce their allegiance to him. Instead, by faith they trusted that the resurrection to come would be infinitely better and more glorious than anything this present life might bring to them.

Do you want to know what faith is, the sort that pleases and honors God? It’s right here. Faith is when the human heart says, “Although I’ve been offered everything I could possibly dream of, *Jesus is better*.” Faith is when the human heart says, “Although I’ve lost everything I dreamed of, *Jesus is better*.” Faith doesn’t say: “If God really loved me he would deliver me from the hands of those who would torture me.” Faith says: “There is a resurrection life that is infinitely better than what I might gain if I escaped torture.”

The “faith” that our author is describing in this chapter “loves God more than life. Faith loves God more than family. Faith loves God more than job or retirement plans or ministry or writing books or building the dream house or making the first million. Faith says, ‘Whether God handles me tenderly or gives me over to torture, I love him. He is my reward (11:6), the builder of the city I long for (11:10), the treasure beyond the riches of Egypt (11:26), and the possession that surpasses all others and abides for ever (10:34)’” (John Piper, “Faith to Be Strong and Faith to Be Weak,” a sermon preached on August 10, 1997; www.desiringgod.org).

“Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment” (v. 36a). This may well refer to Jeremiah and all that he suffered (see Jer. 20:2; 37:15; 38:6ff). King Asa imprisoned the prophet Hanani when he rebuked him for not trusting in the Lord (2 Chron 16:7-10), and King Ahab imprisoned Micaiah for prophesying his death (2 Kings 22:26-27).

“They were stoned” (v. 37a). Again, this is a likely reference to Jeremiah. See especially Matt. 23:37.

“They were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword” (v. 37b). Whoa! Wait a minute! This simply can’t be. Back in v. 34 we read of men and women who “by faith” ***“escaped*** the edge of the sword.” How in the world are we now to believe that others had the same kind and quality of “faith” and yet were “sawn in two”? Some may be tempted to say to those who died: “If you had only exercised the same quality of faith, the same kind and strength of faith that we saw in Daniel, you wouldn’t have been sawn in two. Daniel believed God and was preserved alive. You obviously failed to believe God and *that* is why you died.” **No! No! Forever and again, No!**

Most believe that this is a reference to Isaiah and how he died (described in the extra-biblical book, *Ascension of Isaiah* 5:11-14). So in some cases the faithful were delivered ***from*** death and others among the faithful were delivered over ***into*** death. Some “by faith” ***escape*** the edge of the sword while others “by faith” are ***executed*** by the edge of the sword. So sometimes God delivers his people through their faith and at other times God sustains them through faith as they suffer horrific deaths at the hands of their enemies.

“They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, . . . wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (vv. 37c-38). This was the experience of so many in Israel’s history and in the history of the early church that it would be fruitless to try to list them all.

Thomas Schreiner points to those who “wandered in deserts, such as Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:4; 2 Kings 2:8) and those recorded in Maccabees (1 Macc. 2:29, 31; 5:24; 9:33, 62; 2 Macc 5:27). The godly sometimes had to flee evil by hiding in caves, just as many prophets were hidden by Obadiah (1 Kings 18:4, 13), and David hid in a cave from his enemies (1 Sam 22:1; cf. also 2 Macc. 6:11; 10:6). Similarly, Israel hid from the Philistines after Saul became king (1 Sam 13:6; cf. 1 Sam 14:11).”

“But Sam, I’ve been taught that if you only have enough faith you will enjoy material and social prosperity. So, clearly, these people *failed to have faith* and thus suffered what they deserved. If they had only banished all doubt from their minds and exerted their faith and confessed it aloud they could have enjoyed the blessings of an entire closet full of cashmere sweaters and elegant tailor-made suits instead of languishing in the ‘skins of sheep and goats.’ Rather than being ‘destitute’ they could have enjoyed the benefits of a multi-million-dollar 401-K.” **No! No! Forever and again, No!**

That isn't to say there is anything wrong with cashmere sweaters, tailor-made suits, and a substantial 401-K. We ought to thank God for such material luxuries! What is wrong is drawing a cause and effect correlation between the two, as if your faith is the *reason* why you have been blessed with an expensive wardrobe and expansive investment portfolio. People of great faith may live at subsistence level and suffer greatly at the hands of the world while those with no faith may flourish financially.

If you doubt what I'm saying, look closely at ***God's assessment*** of those who are described here in vv. 35-38. It's found in that parenthetical statement in v. 38a – these were men and women ***“of whom the world was not worthy”*** (v. 38a). If that doesn't turn your value system inside out, nothing will! This is one of those instances when something is the utter opposite of what it seems. ***They were treated as outlaws and outcasts who, supposedly, were unfit for civilized society. The truth is that so-called civilized and sophisticated society was not fit for them!*** God, in fact, was providing the unbelieving world with a glorious gift and expression of love: he displayed for them in the faithful suffering of these people an example of the truth that God is himself better than life, better than clothing, better than health and wealth and all this fallen world can offer.

Conclusion

In closing I want to make three simple observations.

First, if you are experiencing a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad **day**” or perhaps it's a **month** now, or even a **year**, or, although I hesitate to say it, a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad **life**,” it doesn't necessarily mean you lack faith or that God has abandoned you or that you can't be productive and honoring to the Lord and your life count for something.

Second, if you are experiencing a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day/month/year/life” it doesn't mean that God won't honor your faith by performing life-changing, Christ-exalting miracles like the ones mentioned in this passage. Neither the pain nor pleasure you feel in your body, neither the deprivation nor prosperity reflected in your bank account, neither the success nor failure of your professional life, is any measure or barometer of God's ability and willingness to accomplish remarkable things through your faith.

Third, faith is not a magical formula that guarantees financial, physical, personal, or social success. Faith is clinging to God whether he parts the Red Sea for you or you find yourself living penniless in a cave. Faith is hoping in God whether you are promoted and praised or persecuted and afflicted. Faith is trusting him whether you are delivered from the sword or you die by its sharp edge.