

“These Were Commended for Their Faith”

ISAIAH 53:1-12; HEBREWS 11:30-40

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • May 7, 2017

Congregation of Christ: “Start calling yourself healed, happy, whole, blessed, and prosperous. Stop talking to God about how big your mountains are, and start talking to your mountains about how big your God is! Don’t just accept whatever comes your way in life. You were born to win; you were born for greatness; you were created to be a champion in life.”

Compare this quote with verses 35-38 of our text, describing the tremendous hardship many believers suffer at the hands of the enemies of God. But many people today are enticed by the false prosperity gospel teaching promoted on TV, like the above quote from Joel Osteen, pastor of a church in a 18,000-seat stadium in Houston. Steven Furtick is another health and wealth teacher, pastor of a 13,000-people megachurch near Charlotte, North Carolina. A few weeks ago, he was one of the prosperity gospel pastors who spoke at a seminar called “Missions & Marketplace: The Power to Get Wealth.”

Why would a pastor speak at such seminars where all they talk about is money, money, money? How do they explain the persecution, torture, deprivation and martyrdom of many believers in many parts of the world throughout the ages? How do they explain the sufferings of untold thousands of Christians in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and other Muslim-dominated countries? Does God single out these Christians for persecution, but not Americans? How do they explain Jesus’ teaching that we cannot worship both God and money?

The author of Hebrews was writing to a church made up of Jews who were suffering at the hands of both Romans and fellow Jews. The persecution was such that some were turning back from their faith in Christ to their former ways of being right with God through sacrifices and good works. So after defining faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,*” he gives several examples of those who had evidenced this true faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea after escaping Egypt.

Our text then continues with the faith of the Israelites conquering Jericho with the help of a Canaanite woman named Rahab, and then conquering and settling the rest of the Promised Land. The writer then lists the rest of his examples of people who evidenced their faith by their works: some of the judges, King David, and the prophets. All of them were “*commended through their faith*” by God himself. Some were victorious over the enemies of God, but many more suffered hardship at the hands of their enemies. They were not healed, happy, whole, blessed, and prosperous people. They were not born to win, to be great, and to be champions.

They persevered to the end because they looked forward to the reward that God had promised to them, but never seeing the reward while they were still alive.

Faith to Conquer Enemies

In verses 32-38, the writer gives the last examples of saving faith evidenced by good works. These examples are grouped into two: those who by faith conquered enemies; and those who by faith conquered hardship.

Those in the first group are Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. The writer says that *“time would fail me to tell”* of all the stories of these faithful men *“who through faith 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, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection.”* Who are these people?

Going back to verses 30-31, we are reminded of the Israelites who after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, came to the gates of Canaan, the Promised Land, on the east side of the Jordan River. They had to cross this river, and God repeated his mighty work 40 years before when he dried up the Red Sea so they could cross on dry ground.

After they crossed the Jordan, they faced the mighty people of Jericho, a city *“fortified up to heaven”* (Deu 9:1), very high and strong walls! What can they do against the city? Did they have artillery to break the walls? Did they have battering rams to destroy the gates? They didn't. Instead, God commanded them to march silently around the city once every day for six days. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times, then give a big shout to God. The people of Jericho were probably amused by Joshua's great military strategy. And Joshua? He had to have so much faith to lead the people on these ridiculous thirteen marches. But with a shout and the blaring of the trumpets, the walls of Jericho crumbled. Mighty Jericho was conquered, not by Israel's might, but by their faith in God's Word.

Then there was Rahab, a prostitute and a pagan Canaanite, who helped hide the two spies. Our writer says, *“By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient.”* How did she come to faith in the God of Israel when she lived in a pagan land? Joshua 2:9-11 tells us. Rahab gave a testimony to the spies that she had heard about how the God of Israel is giving the land to Israel; that the LORD dried up the Red Sea; and that he conquered the Amorites. She said that the hearts of the inhabitants melted and they feared God. So she confessed, *“for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.”*

Why would the writer list Rahab instead of, say, Joshua, or Job, who was faithful through all that he suffered? It is because Rahab became an important part of God's salvation plan. She became an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in her sinfulness and as a pagan outsider, the author emphasizes that God works faith in the hearts of even the most wretched sinners. As well, God is sovereign over every creature to work out his plan using whoever he chooses and what plan he designs.

Then in verses 32-35, he gives a sample of six men who showed by their deeds their faithfulness to God. These span the history of Israel from the judges to the kings and down through the prophets. Gideon believed God's word that he is able to conquer the powerful Midianite army with 300 men. Barak, under the judge Deborah, believed that God would deliver the mighty Canaanites into his hand. Samson singlehandedly delivered Israel from the Philistines. Jephthah defeated the Amorites and the Ammonites. Samuel was faithful as God's judge and prophet. King David was a faithful king. The prophets were faithful in their words and deeds in the face of persecution and threat of death. Samson and David stopped the mouths of lions, and Daniel's friends quenched the power of fire. The son of Zarephath's widow was raised from the dead by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:17-22), as well as the son of Shunnamite woman (2 Kgs 4:32-35).

Joshua and his army, the judges, and the kings *"conquered kingdoms," "escaped the edge of the sword,"* and *"were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."* They *"obtained promises"* by God that he would give them the Promised Land. The judges and kings also *"enforced justice"* (verses 33-34)

But all of them were also flawed sinners. Gideon built an ephod which later became an object of idolatry. Barak did not lead until a woman asked him to lead the army. Samson, we all know, lived a riotous, immoral life. Jephthah made a foolish vow costing him the life of his only daughter. King David committed heinous sins against God. In spite of their sinfulness, God used them to accomplish the salvation of his people.

The writer uses these examples to encourage his readers to be strong in the faith so they would prevail over their enemies. He encourages you as well. But you might say, "How can I do these things? I'm no hero of the faith." But you can conquer the hearts of unbelieving family and friends. God can turn your fears, flaws and weaknesses into strength to help in the work of the church. You can be mighty in your spiritual battles against worries, sufferings and afflictions. You can stop the mouths of naysayers and enemies of Christ. You can quench the fiery darts of temptation sent by the devil. God will empower you to be able to do all these things. How? By regularly reading, studying, meditating on God's Word, and by always being in prayer, *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Faith to Conquer Hardship

But then the writer gives some other examples of faithful men and women. This time, these people were "losers" in the sight of their enemies. They lost their physical battles.

The writer might be referring to the events in the second-century B.C. revolt of the Maccabean Jews against their Seleucid masters. After the death of Alexander the Great, his empire was divided into four parts ruled by his four generals. One of them was named Seleucus. One of the heirs of Seleucus was Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig, and then massacred thousands of Jews. Most likely, the author refers to

these Jews when he wrote, *“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.”* They would have been released if only they rejected the God of Israel, but they didn’t. So they were imprisoned, mocked and flogged. But they knew their reward: the life after would be better than their earthly life. Their resurrection would be better than the resurrections in the Old Testament because theirs was an eternal resurrection.

Jesus referred to the stoning of faithful prophets and priests, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”* (Matt 23:37). Untold numbers of the faithful were killed by the sword of their enemies. In most Jewish traditions, the prophet Isaiah was executed by the wicked king Manasseh by sawing his body in two. Many of them were deprived and destitute. When Elijah fled from King Ahab into a cave in the wilderness, he had to be fed and nourished by ravens sent by God. Jeremiah was thrown down into a well, Daniel into a lion’s den. John the Baptist wore animal skins and ate locusts in the wilderness.

By rejecting these faithful men and women of God, their enemies condemned themselves. They were not worthy of any promise of God to the faithful. Today, God is wrathful against Muslims who sow terror and murder among Christians in the Middle East and Africa. But faithful believers who suffer and are martyred receive the promise of eternal life in Christ.

Like these faithful ones, our Lord Jesus Christ suffered, but his suffering was the greatest of all, because he was forsaken by God on the cross. *“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.. stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted... he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted.”* This was all for the forgiveness of the sins of his people.

Faith to be Assured of the Promise

Israel received all of God’s promises to their forefather Abraham: a multitude of descendants and a land of sojourning. But these Old Testament believers never saw the greatest promise: and this promise was the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. They longed for and looked forward to the coming of Israel’s Comfort. We on this side of the cross and the empty tomb look back to the finished work of Christ for the forgiveness of all our sins. From the beginning, the promise of God to his people is this, *“I will be your God and you will be my people.”* He fulfilled this promise to both his Old Testament and New Testament people by sending his only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, our Immanuel, “God with us.”

Chapter 11 begins with the definition of faith as *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* The writer then lists examples of those whose faith was evidenced by their works. These men and women in the “Hall of Faith” had assurance and conviction of the hope that God promised, while they walked by faith and not by sight. This hope, assurance and conviction of unseen things are embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the reality, the fulfillment, of what God has promised to all his saints.

Dear friends: This “hall of faith” is for us examples of true faith evidenced by works. But they are much more than examples. The main purpose of the writer is to present the person and work of Jesus as the fulfillment of all God’s promises. He explains how Jesus is better than the angels. He is better than the prophet Moses, the greatest prophet. He is the better High Priest of a better Temple—the Church—under a better, new covenant. In the new covenant, he himself is the better and once-for-all sacrifice for all the sins of all his people.

All the faithful ones throughout the ages—from Abel to Abraham, Joseph to John Calvin, Rahab to Ruth Hutchens, Moses to Martin Luther—were made perfect in Christ.

In this age and in this life, you live by faith and not by sight. Your final victory will come only after you persevere over evil, sufferings and temptations. Rejoice, give praise and thanks to God for this wonderful reward: Jesus Christ and the eternal life he brings. When he returns, or at the end of your days on this earth, you too will enter the perfect kingdom of God, where he waits for you at the gates with this commendation, *“Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”*

Our hymn of commitment has this promise from God: “Not one of all the chosen race but shall to heaven attain; here they will share abounding grace, and there with Jesus reign” (“How Vast the Benefits Divine” by Horatio Bonar).