

SERMON CCI Hebrews 11: 30- 40 Two Sides of Faith

SLIDE 40 We began our sermon series on the Heroes of Faith with Hebrews 11: ***Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*** And we have seen that living by faith is not just believing in our head, but is acting out our faith with courage.

We've seen stories of God working miraculously in response to people's faith in impossible situations. Abraham and Sarah longed for a son and even though Sarah was infertile and Abraham and Sara were both long past child-bearing years, God gave them a son and much more. We saw that God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt miraculously, and even when Pharaoh's army chased after them to bring them back, God led them across the Red Sea on dry ground while the army drowned behind them.

In today's reading, we heard even more of God's power in impossible situations. **SLIDE 41** In the Jericho story, God's people had finally arrived in the Promised Land and one of the first cities they needed to conquer was Jericho, a city protected by huge walls and a well-trained army. God's people's swords and courage weren't anything against the impossible wall around Jericho. But by faith, they followed God's seemingly ridiculous battle plan and silently marched around the city every day and on the 7th day, God caused Jericho's walls to come tumbling down.

Then we read about the faith of the woman, Rahab. She was a prostitute living in Jericho. Joshua had sent two spies to Jericho to find out what they were up against. When the king found out the spies were staying at Rahab's home, he sent soldiers to kill the spies and that traitor, Rahab. Here was another impossible situation. But, by faith, Rahab hid the spies, and in return, she and her family were rescued when God's people conquered the city after the walls came tumbling down.

Gideon and Barak were frightened soldiers until God gave them the courage to fight against their people's enemies. God shut the lions' mouths for Daniel, God rescued Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the burning flames. The widow of Zarephath and the Shunnamite woman, were both foreigners to the Hebrew faith, and yet God's prophets brought their dead children back to life again. All these men and women cried out to God, and he delivered them in mighty ways. Time after time we see God's power in response to the people's faith in the face of impossible situations.

This is the first side of faith- it's the side we like. That when we believe, God acts on our behalf. But does living by faith mean you will always receive a miracle?

I had a friend once who was a faithful miracle-believing Christian. Boy, could she pray for God's help! Her mother developed late-stage lung cancer with little hope for survival. But my friend had 100% faith in God's power to heal, in miracles, in God's love for her mother, in God's faithfulness. She was so certain that God was going to heal her mother that she began to plan the party to celebrate her mom's complete healing.... And then her mother died. It almost destroyed my friend's faith because she had been so certain that her miracle would come. We've all known situations when the miracle didn't come. In those moments we wonder what happened, we may blame God for letting us down, or blame ourselves for not having enough faith. If we've ever wondered why God doesn't do for us what he seems to do for others, the last half of this paragraph has a message for us.

SLIDES 42-44 Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned and they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

I don't know about you, but these words are hard for me to read. Who were these unnamed people Hebrews described? And what did they do to deserve such punishment? They were men and women who lived by faith just as much as Noah, Abraham, or Moses or Rahab and others who got a miracle. Their faith was not weaker than others who survived or were rescued. If anything, their faith was stronger because it enabled them to endure incredible suffering, when they weren't rescued, and a miracle didn't come. They died in horrible ways we can hardly imagine. Their deaths remind me of the tortures and killings by ISIS as they cut off people's heads on the beach, or burned people alive in cages. Some of these people of faith even chose to die for the cause of Christ when they could have been released. Death was not something to avoid; it was an opportunity to live by faith to the very end, knowing there was a heavenly reward waiting for them. Did God let them be killed and treated horribly because he loved them less? No, in fact, God commends them for their faith with the incredible words, "The world was not worthy of them."

I want to tell the story of one more person of faith, a monk named Telemachus who lived during the last part of the fourth century.

One day, Telemachus felt God calling him to go to Rome although he had no idea why God would want him to go. So he caught a boat for Rome. He found great crowds moving through the streets toward the Coliseum. He followed the crowds and thought to himself, "Perhaps this is the reason why God has called me here." The crowds had gathered for the gladiator contests where men would fight against each other until only one man was left alive. Then the wild animals would be let loose to devour the bodies of the dead gladiators while the crowds cheered.

Telemachus was shocked. He had never seen such a thing. And he knew what he was there to do. He ran to the edge of the arena and cried with a loud voice, "IN THE NAME OF CHRIST, STOP!"

No one paid attention. So Telemachus stepped into the arena, rushing here and there, dodging the gladiators as they thrust at each other. He cried out again, "IN THE NAME OF CHRIST, STOP!" The crowd became angry because he was interrupting their entertainment. And they stoned the elderly monk to death.

Living by faith, in the end, meant dying by faith. And by faith, he made a difference in the world through his death. When the emperor heard of the death of Telemachus, he soon ordered that gladiator battles end.

All these heroes of faith teach us something important about the other side of faith. Faith in the unseen God who keeps his promises is faith **in God**, not faith in the answer we want. It's faith in God's faithfulness, not faith in being rescued or blessed or protected. Faith **in God** trusts the answer to our prayers **to God**. Faith is what gave the martyrs the courage to stand in the face of fire or sword, or stoning, or being cut in two, or dying in prison. Sometimes I think it is a disadvantage to live in America because we can appeal to our rights as citizens to protect us from the consequences of our faith, rather than just standing firm no matter what. We become angry or sue when others don't respect our faith. If we feel persecuted when people don't want us to say, "Merry Christmas," what will we do if we ever face real persecution like what these heroes faced?

Faith gave these unnamed people the understanding that God not only does miracles, but God also works through trials and suffering and conflict to accomplish his purposes, both to strengthen their own faith and to work through them for the benefit of others. We don't learn much about faith when life is easy; we learn about faith when times are hard. These people died not knowing how

many people watched their calm faith and had their own faith strengthened. And this world is still not worthy of them.

What impossible situations are we facing? Maybe it's a family situation. Or a job crisis, or a health condition for which there is no sure cure. How about as a church? Anyone feeling a little "Been there, done that?" You've tried to grow before, and here you are again. Should you call a traditional pastor? Been there, done that. Partner with another church? Been there, done that. And the wall is still there. As I researched a larger space for us these past 3 weeks, I hoped and prayed to find a remarkable space that would allow growth at a reasonable cost. And every space I looked at or talked about with a broker or landlord either wouldn't work for us or was not available. Every one. I learned that the inventory for spaces for lease is low right now but God is powerful. So I kept praying and looking. And as I pushed against that wall, my stress level went up. What do we do when the walls don't come tumbling down?

The stories in today's scripture reading remind us that there are two sides of faith. The first side of faith invites us to pray for what we need with faith in God's promises. To pray big prayers because we have a big God. And to keep our eyes open for God to work, even miraculously. It also invites us to wait for God's timing like Abraham and Sarah. The other side of faith allows God to use the wall to grow our faith and endurance, to accomplish something we cannot see right now, to witness to His power under pressure, or to force us to choose what we trust more- what we want or God Himself. The other side of faith opens the door to more ways for God to work that we cannot see. The moment I stopped pushing against that rental wall, and gave God room to do something different that I still do not see, I experienced the peace all my pushing would never bring. When Telemarchus died in the arena, there was no miracle, but God used it to bring about something Telemarchus never got to see in this life- the end of the brutal gladiator fights. What will we allow God to do in and through us as we face our walls?

One day may it be said of us, "the world was not worthy of them." May the prayer of our hearts be, "In my life (or death), Lord, be glorified."