

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **God's Hall of Faith: The Gallery of Israel's Golden Age, Captivity, and Dispersion**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 11:32-40

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In our journey through God's Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, we have walked through the Gallery of the Ancients, the Gallery of the Patriarchs, and the Gallery of the Exodus and the Conquest. But once Israel inherited the Promised Land, did the need for faith disappear? Not at all. It was still essential and still evident during Israel's Golden Age, Captivity, and Dispersion. These are the final galleries of the Hall of Faith that we will explore this morning.

Please turn in your Bibles with me to Hebrews 11:32-40:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

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; 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.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

The Gallery of Israel's Golden Age reveals that God can and does work miracles to deliver those who exercise faith in Him. (32-34)

The Golden Age Of Israel is often considered the time of the United Monarch (Saul, David, Solomon), but I'm using the term to speak more broadly of the entire time from the Conquest of the Promised Land to the Babylonian Captivity, i.e. from roughly 1350 to 600 B.C. This period includes the period of the Judges, the United Kingdom, and the Divided Kingdom.

Here's how the author introduces this gallery: "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets." Gideon, of course, is best known for his defeat of the Midianites after God ordered him to pare his army of 32,000 fighting men to a mere 300, who were then armed only with trumpets and jars with torches inside. The mention of Barak, Samson, and Jephthah seems strange in that all three have major blots on their character, and even on their faith. But at a key point in each of their lives

they all trusted God when faced with enormous odds against them.

“Hearts of iron, feet of clay” is a phrase coined by my friend Gary Inrig to describe many of these Old Testament heroes. And no one fits that better than David, the only king named in all of Hebrews 11. Though as famous for his sins as for his faith, he was clearly one who from childhood had a simple faith in God—taking on lions and bears with his bare hands, as well as Goliath with a simple slingshot. It seemed not even to occur to David *not* to trust in the Lord. Though quite imperfect, God called him “a man after My heart; he will do everything I want him to do” (Acts 13:22).

Samuel is the last person mentioned in this list by name. He was the last of the judges but the first of the prophets. Though not a warrior, he fought a battle as fierce as any faced by the military leaders—only it was against immorality and idolatry among his own people. It often takes more courage, you know, to stand up against our friends than against our enemies.

Verse 32 concludes with a mention of “the prophets,” including the likes of Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Micaiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others, all of whom demonstrated incredible faith in the face of very hostile conditions.

The author of Hebrews then turns from these great examples of faith to specific actions that earned them and others a place in the Hall of Faith. The *conquering of kingdoms* was seen in Gideon, Jephthah, and to a marked degree in David’s reign. The *administration of justice* reminds us of Samuel, who addressed the nation at the end of the period of the Judges, at a time when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Would that we had national leaders today who would say what he said and demonstrate the integrity he showed:

“Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right.”

It was Samuel’s faith that overcame the almost universal tendency toward corruption in government.

Beginning in verse 33 we see the fact that God’s miraculous power is never more evident than during this period. The reference to those who *stopped the mouths of lions* brings readily to mind the boy David, who tore open the mouth of a lion attacking his sheep (1 Samuel 17:34ff), and Samson, who killed a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:6), but especially Daniel, who survived being thrown into a lions’ den. In each case courage, fortified by faith, is prominent in the story. The *quenching of the fury of the flames* immediately calls to mind the story of the three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. You remember their incredible speech to the most powerful potentate in the world:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

I like the way F. F. Bruce highlights the faith of these three young men:

Had they received a special revelation that their lives would be preserved, it would have called for considerable faith to act upon it in face of the burning fiery furnace; but to behave as they did without any revelation of the kind called for much greater faith.¹

The reference to those *who escaped the edge of the sword* could refer to any number of miraculous deliverances from violent action, as when Elijah was delivered from Jezebel or Jeremiah from Jehoiakim. When he speaks of those whose *weakness was turned to strength*, one can't help but think of Samson, whose strength was sapped because of sin, but in the last desperate act of his life he pulled down the two huge pillars that held up the roof of the pagan temple of Dagon, killing more of Israel's enemies in his death than he had during his entire lifetime. And those who *became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies* reminds us of Hezekiah in Isaiah 37. After he received a threatening letter from Sennacherib, he went to the temple, spread it out before the Lord and prayed. Then we read,

Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

In verse 35 the author speaks of *women who received back their dead, raised to life again*. Undoubtedly he is thinking of Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:17ff, and Elisha the Shunammite woman's son in 2 Kings 4:18ff. If you read those stories carefully, you note that the faith is exercised by the prophets, not the women, but that doesn't contradict verse 35. It simply says, "Women received back their dead, raised to life again."

These are amazing stories of courage and faith, with profound miracles of various kinds being performed in response to that faith. But does faith always produce good results? Some would say "yes." In fact, there are many popular preachers spouting the notion that God wants all of us to be rich, happy, successful, and trouble-free all the time. I would say that the church today is quite good at the theology of winning. But Hebrews 11, starting in the middle of verse 35, tells us we also need a Biblical theology of losing (in *this* life, at least) because God sometimes responds to faith by allowing terrible tragedy.

Do you see the shift in verse 35 with the word "others"? "Others were tortured . . . some faced jeers and flogging, while others were chained and put in prison . . ." and, of course, some were even executed. Apparently one can't always measure faith by the success it produces. It must be measured by obedience. In *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has Screwtape, the demon, writing to his nephew, Wormwood:

"Our cause, (i.e. Satan's cause) is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will (i.e. God's will), looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

In our next gallery we find a set of exhibits, individuals who still obeyed in spite of the worst possible circumstances. And isn't this really where faith is ultimately proven? We all know that it's hard at times to believe and obey even when things are going well, when we're surrounded by other believers, and when our faith costs us little. Faith is really proved when it encounters disaster, persecution, ridicule or worse—and still stands firm.

The gallery of the Captivity and the Dispersion reveals that God does not always work miracles to deliver his faithful people; sometimes He sustains them through suffering and worse. (35-38)

In 606 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar marched against Jerusalem, seizing wealth and captives, among them Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Obednego. He came back again eight years later, and a third time in 586—this time wiping Jerusalem off the map and taking all of its healthy inhabitants to Babylon. This marks the period known as the Babylonian Captivity and the Dispersion of Israel.

While some of the Jews were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem 70 years later under the Persian King Cyrus, Israel never regained its former power and influence. From this point on it was always under foreign domination—first to Babylon, then the Medo-Persian Empire, Greece, and finally Rome. In A.D. 70, shortly after the Book of Hebrews was written, the Roman Emperor Titus once again destroyed Jerusalem, and the Jews were once again dispersed from the land, a condition that continued until 1947.

The Babylonian Captivity ushers in a long period of trial and suffering for the people of Israel. Faith is not absent even during this time. However, for the most part miracles give way to severe trial. I trust you are aware that miracles are the exception, not the rule, even in biblical times. There were three periods when miracles were common—the time of Moses, the time of the major prophets, and the time of Jesus and the Apostles. For the most part, miracles are missing from the rest of history, even biblical history. That's important, because it's easy to think there's something wrong with our faith when we're not seeing miracles. Maybe, maybe not. Certainly in this gallery we see people of great faith who did not experience miraculous deliverance.

In verse 35 the Greek verb for “torture” refers to being stretched on the rack and then having one's taut stomach beaten as one beats a drum, until the muscle walls collapse and, more often than not, death ensues.ⁱⁱ Yet they refused the release that was offered them, because it required that they deny their faith. This they would not do.

What motivated such faith? It was hope in a better resurrection. Better than what? Better than the kind of resurrection experienced by the Shunammite's son or the son of the widow of Zarephath or Lazarus, for that matter. As amazing as those resurrections were, each was raised in a mortal body and died again. But there is a better resurrection, the final resurrection, awaiting people of faith. It is spoken of in wonderful detail in 1 Cor. 15 as an immortal, imperishable, and uncorruptible body. These faithful were willing to accept the worst the world has to offer in exchange for the best God had to offer—final resurrection.

The author reiterates other ways believers suffered, both mentally and physically. Verse 36–“Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.” Perhaps he is thinking of Jeremiah, who was ridiculed, beaten and placed in stocks by his own people, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern for telling them the truth. In fact, torture and persecution were so frequent from the time of Nebuchadnezzar right up to the first century AD that every reader of this Epistle probably had an ancestor or friend or relative who experienced persecution.

Death by stoning was a well-established method of execution. Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada was stoned to death in the Temple courtyard by order of King Josh (2 Chronicles 24:20-21). Strong Jewish tradition suggests Jeremiah himself was eventually stoned to death at the hands of Jews in Egypt, who could not tolerate his protests against their continued idolatry. The NT deacon Stephen was killed this same way, an incident with which the recipients of this letter were undoubtedly familiar.

Being *sawed in two* is the way Isaiah died, according to two early church writers—Justin and Origin. His enemies are said to have found the great prophet hiding in a hollow cedar tree, so they just sawed it in two, killing the aged prophet. Still others were *put to death by the sword*. Please don't miss the fact that the author sees no contradiction between verse 34 and 37: Some “escaped the edge of the sword,” but others “were put to death by the sword.” By faith one lived; by faith the other died. It reminds us of the story in Acts 12:2, where King Herod “had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword,” but when he tried to do the same to Peter, the Lord rescued Peter from his hands. Why? Only God can answer that, and He's not telling. He has His own purposes that He carries out in each of our lives.

The last part of verse 37 describes cases of prolonged hardship and suffering: “They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.” Outcasts from society, these believers did not enjoy even the bare necessities of life.

At this point the author of Hebrews seems to be suddenly caught up in the fact that he has been describing men and women who are in a class by themselves. He exclaims, “the world was not worthy of them.” The great people of this world, in spite of their possessions and status, their intellect and achievements, are so inferior to these individuals of faith that they are not worthy to have these men and women of faith live here with them.

But he then returns to the plight of the faithful, saying “they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.” Elijah hid in a cave (1 Kings 19:9), and perhaps you remember the account of Obadiah, who hid 100 prophets in two caves and supplied them with food and water, during Jezebel's reign, as she attempted to kill off all of God's prophets (1 Kings 18).

Having completed a very hasty tour through these amazing galleries of God's Hall of Faith, it's as though our guide has us all sit down on the marble benches in the lobby as he summarizes one

of the key principles which we should have picked up automatically, but he wants to be sure we have it in our minds.

Whether delivered by faith or sustained by faith, God’s people experience delay in realizing the ultimate reward of faith (39-40)

Verse 39: “These were all commended for their faith.” Not only those who experienced God’s miraculous delivery but also those who experienced His sustaining grace—all were commended for their faith. The word “commended” is found at both the beginning and the end of our chapter. In verse 2 the author said of faith: “This is what the ancients were commended for,” and now at the end he says the same thing of all the heroes. And who is doing the commending? God Himself has borne witness to their faithfulness, even in the face of a plethora of trials, tortures, tests, and even martyrdom (in fact, we get our English word “martyr” directly from this word translated “commended”. A martyr is one who gives the ultimate witness of his faith.).

But none received what was promised, not yet at least. Look at the rest of verse 39: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.” Even the ones who were rescued, resurrected, and rewarded failed to realize the greatest object of their faith. That was not the Promised Land; it was the promise of a coming Messiah, a New Covenant, and the Kingdom of God. They lived and died expecting this but none of them witnessed its fulfillment. Not then, at least. But eventually they will.

And who are the beneficiaries of this delay in the realization of the rewards of their faith? WE ARE. Verse 40 says, “God had planned something better *for us* so that only together *with us* would they be made perfect.” Josh has talked a lot about the corporate nature of the promises and the importance of seeing ourselves, not as isolated individuals, but as a part of the family of faith. That is true not only within a local church but also within the universal church. And it is true not only within the universal church that is alive today, but true also with the family of faith that began with Abraham!

The age of the new Covenant has dawned. The Messiah whose day these OT men and women of faith looked forward to has come and because of His death on the cross and His high-priestly ministry they and we together now enjoy unrestricted access to God, as fellow-citizens of heaven.

Well, our tour has been exciting, if occasionally gory. The history lessons have been interesting. But what does this great chapter have to say to you and me today? I want to set aside the analytical outline for a moment and look back over this chapter for some principles that are transferable and digestible.

Principles to ponder from God’s Hall of Faith

1. Biblical faith is not limited to any one personality type, gender, age, status, or race. Abel was a farmer, Abraham a wealthy and powerful Patriarch, Joseph a prisoner turned

politician, Moses a shepherd, Rahab a reformed Gentile prostitute, Gideon a soldier, Jephthah a judge, and David a king and a songwriter. These were people of normal needs and from all walks of life—but they all took God at His Word in the face of enormous odds. That says something to us here this morning, because I believe ordinary people with extraordinary faith in God are still being added to God's Hall of Faith. This chapter has more than 40 verses and some of those verses are being written today.

2. Biblical faith is not limited to those who are consistent moral and spiritual giants in their walk with the Lord. Thankfully! Most of the men and women in God's Hall of Faith exhibited major weaknesses in their lives. For example:

Noah got drunk after the flood and committed incest with his daughters.

Abraham was given to lying on occasion and tried to save his own life at the expense of his wife's purity.

Jacob was a chiseler and deceiver.

Moses was a murderer who tried to hide the body of his victim.

Rahab had a history of selling her body on the streets.

Samson was frequently controlled by lust.

Jephthah made a foolish and tragic vow.

The saving feature for each was that when push came to shove they believed God. That speaks to me and tells me that there is nothing I have done that eliminates me from becoming a man of faith now or in the future. What I must do is begin today to increasingly put my confidence in God and begin to take the risks that He sets before me.

George Guthrie discusses a common danger we face in thinking that these people are all different from us. “After all, *they are in the Bible.*” By contrast we may see ourselves as too ordinary or too powerless to live extraordinary lives of faith. But if this is our perspective we miss the whole point. The author is to calling struggling, sometimes bumbling Christians—with all their habits and hangups, warts and worries—to live boldly by faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Biblical faith is willing to believe God against great odds. What were the odds that a universal flood would take place when it had probably never even rained? What were the odds against a 90-year-old woman conceiving? What were the odds against the Red Sea drying up? What were the odds against the walls of Jericho falling down in response to a simple march? Astronomical, in every case. Yet once these individuals discerned clearly that God was behind the command, they proceeded in faith.

4. Biblical faith can have a variety of outcomes. It can have an immediate positive outcome, as seen in Daniel in the Lion's Den or Shadrach, Meshach and Obednego in the fiery furnace. Or it can have a delayed outcome, as with Noah's flood or Isaac's birth. Or it can have a negative outcome (at least as humans judge such things). Faith can result in being tortured, mocked, beaten, imprisoned, or even executed. These do not fit easily into the “God-loves-you-and-has-a-wonderful-plan-for-your-life” gospel of Western Christianity, but they fit well with the honesty of Scripture.

5. Biblical faith is rewarded by God. Perhaps not now, but eventually. Friends, the books will be balanced. As we come to the end of this chapter, what sort of definition of faith might we come up with? How about this one: *Faith is confidence that results in action carried out in a variety of situations by ordinary people in response to the unseen God and his promises, with various earthly outcomes but always the ultimate outcome of God's commendation and reward.*^{iv}

The conclusion our author offers to his tour of God's Hall of faith is found in the opening verses of chapter 12: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus . . ."

Here he looks back at chapter 11 and speaks of "a great cloud of witnesses . . ." Voice after voice from the OT has taken the witness stand and declared that God is trustworthy. Yet the author's purpose in taking us on this tour is not that we might focus our eyes on Noah or Abraham or Moses. Certainly it is instructive and motivating to hear how those of like faith and like failures lived, but we are to fix our eyes on Jesus and Him alone as we run the race of the Christian life.

Of course, no one can run the race if he isn't in the race. And one gets into the race by placing his faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sin. You may be full of faith, you know, but if your faith is in the wrong object, you're hopelessly lost. Jesus is the one in whom we must believe. As Acts 4:12 states so clearly, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

i. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 335.

ii. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13: Word Biblical Commentary*, 388.

iii. George Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary*, 386.

iv. Guthrie, 390.