

• *Examples from Genesis and Joshua*

What greatness faith produces in the saints of God!

- Gideon
- Barak
- Samson
- Jephthah
- David
- Samuel
- The prophets

• *All achieved greatness by persisting in faith*

What great accomplishment s they achieved

- *Personal deliverances*

The weakest people could receive the greatest miracles

Faith enables the endurance of great sufferings

- *Some escaped sufferings*
- *Others endured sufferings*
- *Both by faith*

Our writer could have gone right through the Old Testament picking out the great examples of faith. He has chosen the great examples between Genesis and Joshua. He could have made comments on characters throughout the Old Testament.

What greatness faith produces in the saints of God! He says: ³²*And what more shall I say? For I do not have the time to tell the stories of Gideon, and of Barak, of Samson and Jephthah and David also, and Samuel and the prophets.* The names he mentions are an invitation for us to review their story and see how they too lived by faith. Which particular bits of their story would he have chosen, we wonder. Gideon is known for overcoming a sense of inferiority – by faith¹. Barak was a man who knew his limitations and that too is faith². Samson got into Hebrews 11 because when he seemed to be defeated he went on believing³. Jephthah got into Hebrews 11 because his awful background⁴ and great mistake⁵ did not make him abandon hope in being useful to God. David's faith is seen in the way he heard what everyone else heard and yet viewed it differently⁶. Samuel's faith is seen in that he was open to achieve his life's work of finding a king for Israel even when it seemed impossible⁷. As for the prophets they were famous for enduring in persecution⁸⁹. All of these people were really very ordinary in themselves and yet they achieved greatness by persisting in faith.

What great accomplishments they achieved. There were **mighty successes**. ³³*These people through faith overcame entire kingdoms; they brought about righteousness; they obtained promises.* 'Obtaining a promise' is more than knowing about it and trusting it. It is getting it actually accomplished by persistent faith. There were **personal deliverances**. *These men shut the mouths of lions; ³⁴they put out great flames of fire; they escaped the edge of the sword.* There were times when they had the use of **incredible gifts**. *Out of weakness they were made strong; they became courageous in battle; they put entire foreign armies to flight.*

The weakest people could receive the greatest miracles. Some of the greatest people of faith were women who generally were ill-treated and relatively powerless in the ancient world – and in the modern world too generally speaking. Hebrews 11:35 says, *Women received back their dead by resurrection*, implying that womanly faith was involved. Most resurrections in the Bible are to help women¹.

Faith enables the endurance of great sufferings. He continues: *and others were tortured, declining to take up the offer of deliverance, so that they might attain a better resurrection.* Resurrection is the occasion of reward, and rewards varies, so there is such a thing as a 'better resurrection'. 'Star differs from star in glory.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:41–42; see also Philippians 3:11; note the word 'worthy' in Luke 20:35; and I take 'the first resurrection' in Revelation 20:5 in the same way). In this connection one thinks of the story of Eliezar in 2 Maccabees (one of the books regarded as Scripture by Roman Catholics); it

- ¹ Judges 6:15
- ² Judges 4:8
- ³ Judges 16:28–30
- ⁴ Judges 11:1–3
- ⁵ Judges 11:30–40
- ⁶ 1 Samuel 17:23, 26
- ⁷ 1 Samuel 16:1
- ⁸ Matthew 5:12
- ⁹ James 5:10

- ¹ see 1 Kings 17: 17–24; 2 Kings 4:17–37; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:11–44; Acts 9:36–42

gives a history of the Maccabees' struggle from 176 to 161 BC and tells of Eleazar who welcomed 'death with honour rather than life with pollution, and went up to the rack [an instrument of torture] of his own accord'¹. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, while still others suffered chains and imprisonment. We note that in some cases faith **escaped** sufferings², while in other cases faith **endured** sufferings. Whatever God puts us through – and our persecutors may be defeated in more than one way – God calls us to faith. Sometimes faith must look for rescue; sometimes faith looks for resurrection-to-glory beyond the grave.

¹ 2 Maccabees 6:19

² see 11:34

(i) *Simplistic 'faith teaching' of easy prosperity is not Biblical*

Some obvious deductions follow from our writer's appeal to the heroes of faith. (i) It is obvious – surely – that he would not have been happy with any simplistic teaching that faith can lay hold of easy prosperity. He would have disliked any kind of triumphalistic theory that reckons the Christian life invariably should escape sufferings in the here-and-now. At present this is perhaps the most popular perversion of the Christian faith, but faith is not a matter of persuading God to give us an easy life.

(ii) *We must reckon on great variety within the experience of Christians*

(ii) We must reckon on great variety within the experience of Christians. Some will be led in such a way that they will escape from the very thing that others have to endure. One thinks of the way in which angels opened prison doors for Peter¹ but Paul could be left in prison for years². It required faith either way. Neither experience should lead us to condemn anyone. Those who suffer must not claim to be more spiritual than those who escape. Those who escape must never say, 'If you had faith you would not still be in prison'.

¹ Acts 12:6-11

² Acts 24:27

(iii) *The life of faith has always involved suffering – so we persist for a better resurrection*

(iii) We must remember why our writer is including these comments about the many different kinds of suffering. The Hebrew Christians had faced imprisonment and the seizure of their possessions¹. It had gone on for so long that they are now discouraged. But – says our writer – this kind of experience has always been part of the life of faith. Let us all – he says – be like the heroes of days gone by and persist in faith whether we are rescued or not. A better resurrection awaits us!

¹ 10:34



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