



Ministry of the Word
Sunday 28th July 2019
by Vincent Gannon

Scripture: Hebrews 11:35-40

Subject: Part 39: Supreme Faith – Faith in Tragedy

³⁵ Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. ³⁹ And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, ⁴⁰ God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

The 11th Chapter began with the substance hoped for and the evidence not seen. We looked at the examples of faith, the patterns of faith, the actions of faith, from Abel right through to David and the prophets. Last week we looked at the exploits of Faith, through triumphant circumstances. Many, as we have seen, lived to enjoy the victory of Faith, yet many, as we will see in the next few verses, did not. Many died before they would receive the joy.

The intensity of what the author is expressing continues as we now come to the end of the chapter. It's different from the rest of the chapter, in that, in these verses there are no names, why? Because it includes ordinary people, not necessarily leaders, or those admired by others. Most of these people were not known to the rest of the world, but their lives were and are being followed closely by God. Isn't that interesting? Especially if you are thinking, no-body knows me, or thinks about me, no-body cares about me. But in the grand scheme of things,

you are being closely watched and followed, there is a great concern and care for you, maybe not by the world or by social media or perhaps even your family, but you are known to God. One distinct trait that they all have, even with the rest of the people in chapter 11, is their belief in God. They believed by faith, that God is God, in God's Promises, and that the Messiah is coming.

We have seen that all these people endured in faith no matter what attacked them, they never accepted defeat, therefore they never were defeated. They never denied God, therefore, they were never denied by God. They never lost hope, therefore, they were never left hopeless. They endured by faith, no matter the circumstance, the difficulties, the threats, the injuries, the pain, the torture, the form of execution, and even death. They endured, they held fast in faith, they held fast in their profession of God. God refines His people through struggle, and we prove God in our struggles.

The readers of this epistle could not deny or doubt that faith, and faith alone was the only way to please God and draw close to Him. They could not deny or doubt, right from their Torah, that by faith, the very pillars of truth were established and justified, and they overcame by faith. Their faith remained strong. *Could that be said of you? In spite of pain, persecution, suffering, difficulties and setbacks?*

Remember the context to whom this letter is written to. Make no mistake they would have been well aware of the danger of these things happening to them, if they were not experiencing it already as believers in Christ. No wonder they were thinking, *is it worth it, to continue to be a follower of Jesus?* Their decision to follow the Lord was not "a seven day free trial" and if it didn't work out, well they tried. This was a life or death decision, either way it had consequences, as it always does. *Have we not seen this time and time again? What do you think, is it worth following Jesus?* Now if you think yes, it's worth it, then *how are you living out your faith?*

Let's look at verse 35 - ***Women received their dead raised to life again.***

Two examples of mothers receiving their children back from the dead are found in 1 Kings 17:22-24 and 2 Kings 4:27-37. The first example is of Elijah who went to Zarephath and was looked after by a widow. After a while her son died and as instructed by God, Elijah lay

on top of him and the son was brought back to life. The second example is Elisha who raised the Shunammite woman's son.

The raising of the dead to life is a miraculous event and it was not a common occurrence, even amongst believers. When it happens, we are faced with the same power of God that raised you and I from spiritual death. We are beholding something beyond the ability of man, way beyond it. For an individual to be raised to life it takes a divine external force or power, it does not come from within but from without. There are many examples of God using His servants in this special way. In the New Testament, we see more of this miracle, particularly in the ministry of Jesus, but also in the ministry of the apostles and early church. For instances, in Luke 7:12-16, the raising of the widow's son in a public fashion, became wide spread knowledge, not only did those in the immediate vicinity know, but all of Jerusalem and further afield.

This leads us to the second half of verse 35 and verse 36

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment.

It gets progressively worse. On a human level, these aren't the triumphant ones, these are the people who suffered, even death, treated with evil forces. This has been the experience of God's people, his faithful witnesses in every generation, prophets, innumerable disciples, apostles, martyrs, reformers, who in the majority, their names are unknown to us, but are known to God. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6 verses 3 to 9, that these things are the marks of the ministry or in other words, these are the marks of the Christian walk.

We only have to recall Jeremiah who is an example of this. See Jeremiah 20:1 and 7 and 8, also chapter 37:13-15 and chapter 38:5. Jeremiah was tortured, chained, imprisoned, thrown into a pit. He experienced scourgings, beatings, imprisonments, that would be true of Daniel also. The Old Testament tells us of lots of people who were mocked for their faith and who were killed with the sword. Joseph was mocked for his dreams and for his refusal to submit to temptation. Micaiah in 1 Kings 22, Elijah in 2 Kings 2, Hanani in 2 Chronicles 16, The children of Israel (Numbers 14, Amos 7).

The list could go on and on, of people who experienced all kinds of trials, difficulties, imprisonments and tortures. They were tested, they were tortured, pressured to deny their God, which they wouldn't do. Why do some suffer and others don't? It is clear that the Lord chooses some to glorify His name through suffering while others He brings home to Himself. Even in death of the saints, the Lord is glorified. In fact, it is usually through the persecution that the church grows. It has a way of weeding out the professors from the possessors. This is seen historical and globally amongst the persecuted church. One book that would bless you in this regard is: "***Fox's Book of Martyrs***". We have to keep in mind that those who were raised to life on this earth had to die again and go the way of all flesh. There are only a few exceptions to this - Enoch, Elijah and of course the Lord Himself.

There are those who chose to suffer rather than accept deliverance. Deliverance doesn't always look like the way you think of it. It appears not just foolish but even crazy not to take the "easy" way out. Why suffer for your faith if you can get away from it? Colossians 1v24 tells us – *I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,*

If any believing man knew what it was to suffer for the faith it was the apostle Paul himself. In Acts 24 he was not slow in coming forward to admitting that he himself was a torturer. He crossed the line from darkness to light not realising the actual cost that he would have to pay. If Paul is your hero in faith, let him be your example also. Paul said he was willing to accept his portion and we must be too.

True Faith is tested, even in the moment when it would be easier to deny the faith in order to protect your comfort and your image. Persecution is not just in times past but we see that there are more persecuted Christians in this century than any previously put together.

May I just bring you an update with a report I read from "Release magazine" dated July-Sept 2019. The author is a Bishop Truro.

"Today the persecution of Christians is the highest in modern history. In 2016 over 144 countries persecution has spread. We often hear the public pronouncement of the rise of anti-Semitism but nothing about the rise of anti-Christian. A report prepared for the Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt shows that Christians are by far the most widespread persecuted people and it is a global phenomenon that is growing in scale and intensity. The hardest hit

are the Evangelical's which compromise the minority within these countries." The article goes on to say that in spite of these reports, little is being done either diplomatically, politically, or in any other way. The news media is strangely silent, while the current state of things is a major disaster".

Sometimes, we do not take on the seriousness of our calling. Persecution is on the rise and we need to embrace ourselves that, it's not an *if*, but it's a *when*. It's all about perspective. I was listening to an interview of Bob Fu during the week. He is a Chinese Christian who escaped from China with his family. When he became a Christian he was told by a pastor that he would have to go through prison theology to grow. It wasn't a school of thought, but a place of persecution. He did pray to God to give him 3 years before he would be imprisoned so that his faith could grow. Eventually he did find himself imprisoned a few times, but he said that recently the Chinese government will not allow 2 or more Christians to be in the same cell because they know that where 2 or 3 are gathered in Jesus' name, you have a church.

G.H Morrison wrote –

So this is also a result of faith, not that it brings deliverance to a man, but that sometimes, when deliverance is offered, it gives him a fine courage to refuse it. There are seasons when faith shows itself in taking. There are seasons when it is witnessed in refusing. There is a deliverance that faith embraces. There is a deliverance that faith rejects. They were tortured, not accepting deliverance – that was a sign and seal they were faithful. There are hours when the strongest proof of faith is the swift rejection of the larger room."

You live in a world where you are invited to deny God, His word and His principles. Isn't it time to wake up to the fact that there is a heaven? Our great reward is real? And the reality of all of this? What would denying Christ get you? Maybe a few more moments, hours, days, months, or years but even for the person who denies the Lord, even though they may live for a few more moments, hours, days, months, or years, the fact is, we all know the truth, death eventually comes to everyone anyway, it is appointed once for a person to die... then the judgement.

So why not accept deliverance? The reason why, is the glue that sticks the wood together, the cement that holds the bricks; God's promise of a better resurrection. The resurrection is a vital part of the Gospel as we see in 1 Corinthians 15. They wouldn't banish from their lips the name of the true and living God because they looked for a better resurrection. They looked to the future, eternity in Heaven and being with God is better than

denying Him. Why are some people delivered and others have to suffer? It pleases God. Sometimes that might mean suffering for you. It is better to die than to be a traitor.

This theme of tragedy continues as we read verse 37 –

They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented

According to tradition Jeremiah was stoned and in the Old Testament record of Zechariah, Zechariah was also stoned. Jesus had to remind the leaders of His day that their ancestors murdered the prophets, Matthew 23v34-36. Then afterwards he cried and wept over the city in verse 37 –

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!

One Jewish tradition noted that when Isaiah came to the end of his life, he was on the run for his life away from Manessah, the wicked king, who was persecuting him. Isaiah decided that he was going to hid himself in the hollow of a tree. He climbed into the hollow of the tree, then when the king realised where he was, Manessah got woodcutters and order them to saw the tree in half and thereby sawing Isaiah in half.

Then we see in verse 37 reference to what some had to wear. Sheepskins/goatskins. These are distinct, in line really with homeless, no resources of their own, they experienced extreme poverty, profound pain, persecution, and of course the contrast with this is the plenty in the world. The world may say you don't have to worry about being hurt, or not having enough of clothes, or not having resources, or being afflicted or punished. In our world people want more than enough of clothing, resources and plenty of pleasure. So they we tell you, there's plenty for everyone, you can have it all if you will just stop all this nonsense about Jesus, all this nonsense about the Bible being true, stop all this nonsense about there being only one way to God, stop all this nonsense about sinners needing a Saviour, just stop all of that... and we'll give you all that you need and want. So the invitation is to accept all the things the world has including its lies and reject God's promises, His truth. We've seen this in Matthew 4, when Jesus was being tempted by Satan.

The writer of Hebrews is asking you to stand firm, persevere in Christ and reject the lies of the world. Accept the promises of God. The world can strip us of everything that this world finds valuable, our clothing, our recourses, our property, our homes, force us to close up, they can force us to never meet again in this way, they can afflict us, they can torture us, as much as possible, they can force us to live in a desert, in the middle of no-where, they can force us to live in caves or dens, but they cannot, they can never, take away from us what they never gave to us in the first place. They can't take away Jesus, they can't take away His love from you, they can't away His Grace from you, they can't take away His forgiveness, His peace, His joy. They can't take away the promise of Heaven from you. Why? Because they never gave it to you.. It was God Himself. Jesus said I will never leave you nor forsake you (Matthew 5:1, 10:22,19:29)

Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:11 compared his constant persecution and suffering with that of Jesus in order to demonstrate that the dying and resurrection of Jesus in the Apostle would be something that he would be able to share with others. The writer here is asking you something that the world won't do and that is to stand up for Jesus, to expect ridicule, pain, persecution and problems. Your wealth is in Jesus. Philippians 1v29 -

For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

The world doesn't believe, *but how many Christians actually live their lives like its true?*

Which brings us to verse 38, where we see the world's attitude towards us,

³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

The remaining afflictions of God's people which are being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. This has been experienced as well as continues to be the experience of so many individuals and communities from one century to another that to point to specific instances is needless. The language is vividly descriptive of the indignities and severe hardships which men and women of faith have been willing to endure rather than deny the truth by which they have been liberated by. It depicts, also, the fierce hatred of the unbelieving world in its guilty hostility

to the truth, as it ruthlessly hunts and assaults those whose trust is in the immutability of the divine promises.

But we see what the Spirit of the Lord says about the world here '*Of whom the world was not worthy*' Wow! This is what the Lord says of those who had to wander because they had been disposed of their homes and homelands, having to live in dens and caves, or where ever to seek shelter from the harsh and cruel circumstances of this world. They were separated from society, from their communities, from their families. They were rejected and endured heat and cold, distress and hardship all the while trusting in the Lord of the universe, by faith, trusting Him with all their hearts and their actual lives, remembering the promises that God made, these promises He is going to keep.

What's the world assessment of these people of faith? It says they're pests, irritants, ignorant, harmful which is why they've been deprived of their homes, homelands even their livelihood. The world told them they were unworthy, they had to be left alone, comforts were not approved. The world felt itself somehow diminished by their presence. But the truth is the world wasn't worthy.

Look at what's happening around the world. Look at what's happening in many countries today, where in N. Korea you can be put to death for holding a bible, you can have everything taken away from you and imprisoned in other parts of the world. The world is saying you are harmful. But God says '*of whom the world was not worthy*'

The world say '*not worthy to live*' but The Spirit of God says '*You've got it all wrong, because you're not seeing it from the proper perspective. This world doesn't deserve you. That's why you were never intended to remain here forever. God already has a plan for you. Jesus has gone to make the preparation for you.*'

By rejecting the world, they are rejected by the world. For their refusal to conform to this world's fallen standards, the world attempts to eliminate them and their witness. It is precisely these hunted heroes of the faith of whom (as our author declares in a resounding comment) the world was not worthy. Their nobility and their integrity shine forth all the more brilliantly against the world's dark hatred; for in a world darkened and degraded by sin they

truly are the light, and theirs is the true blessedness and the everlasting reward. Matthew 5:10-13 tells us

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. ¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

As those whose gaze is fixed on a better world, they endure; and by their faith they overcome, knowing as they do (and as the world refuses to acknowledge) that "*the world passes away,*" but that "*he who does the will of God abides for ever*" (1 John 2:17; 5:4).

Verse 39 -

³⁹ And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise,

"*And All these*", that is, the whole succession of men and women of faith. It is those whom we have seen in Chapter 11 – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah right through to Samuel and David. It is all those who have been named and unnamed, who witnessed and endured down through the centuries, leading up to the coming of Christ. These are the individuals who are well attested by their faith, and we have seen that their faith was far from being extinguished. It was constant and prevailed in the face of the severest testing and opposition and so declared the genuineness of their profession.

Their testimony which is a statement concerning the truth, concerning the faithfulness of God, God's ability to keep His promises; their testimony through faith, believed God's Promise even though they hadn't necessarily received God's promise. Please note, God has and had many promises, but here in this verse it refers to a singular promise, so it's a very specific promise. Do you know what this promise is? It is .. Jesus .. It is the promise concerning the seed. All of the old testament saints believed He was coming but they did not see him on this earth. They kept their eyes on God and their reward, which leads us to verse 40.

40 God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

If you are the kind of person who underlines your bible, this is one you may want to. The word 'provides' in the original language is problema, meaning to look ahead, see before-hand, to anticipate, to anticipate with certainty. So this could be read, God having anticipated with certainty because he saw in advance something better. As the *New English Bible* has more effectively rendered the Greek, "with us in mind, God had made a better plan". What does this mean? The Lord foresaw and planned everything in your life. Why is it important for you? God foresaw and planned every difficulty, every set back, every problem, every pain, suffering and persecution. He planned and knows. He made provision for you in all of these things. These old testament saints knew that God would keep His promise. *What was God's plan for the old testament saints?* God's plan was to one day share with the new testament saints the covenant through the Lord Jesus Christ. God knew that the people in the old testament would one day be united with the people in the new testament in the resurrection.

John Calvin wrote:

"If those on whom the great light of grace had not yet shone showed such surpassing constancy in bearing their ills, what effect ought the full glory of the gospel to have on us? A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?"

Ours is the time of fulfilment and yet it is still a time of faith. That is one of the main emphases of this epistle. The faith of those who belonged to the former era is set before us as an example to emulate. For the Christian era is compounded of both the "now" and the "not yet" fulfilment of prophecies and promises. God has indeed achieved every purpose of blessing in the mediatorial work of His Son and our High Priest, Jesus Christ. In Him the blessings of the new covenant are a reality, here and now. With Him the believer is raised to newness of life and experiences the exaltation of heavenly bliss (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1).

At the cross our redemption has been accomplished once and for all, however, we still await the renewal of all creation, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:21-25), the swallowing up of what is mortal by life (2 Corinthians 5:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:42), the disclosure of the

new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness is unchallenged (2 Peters 3:13; Revelation 21:1-5). And so, in our pilgrimage through this still groaning world (Romans 8:22), it is inevitable that we too should endure suffering and hardship and it is required that we too should overcome by faith, our gaze should be fixed intently on Him who is the goal and prize of our ultimate and eternal perfection.

Here in verse 40, it uses the word, *better*. Well for those of you who have been following this study in the book of Hebrews, *Better* is a key word. We have seen in:

- Ch1 v4 – Jesus is so Much better
- Ch7v7 – Jesus is the better Priest
- Ch7v22 – Jesus gives us a better hope
- Ch7v22 – Jesus is the better mediator of a better covenant
- Ch8v6 – Jesus has better promises
- Ch9v23 – Jesus purifies us with a better sacrifice
- Ch10v34 – Jesus has given us heaven, as a better possession
- Ch11v16 – Jesus has given us a better country
- Ch11v35 – Jesus has given us a better resurrection
- Ch11 v35-40 – Jesus has given us better things

Everything about Jesus is Better and in every way!

- Ch3v1 – A better Saviour
- Ch8v6 –better Security
- Ch9v1 –better Sanctuary
- Ch9v1 – Better Sacrifice – we saw what was wrought, sought and taught in that better sacrifice, in that sacrifice, everything is better.

The old testament saints experienced real trials and real triumphs. They experienced some revelation and some miracles but here the writer is saying even though these examples had remarkable testimonies, each and every one of us has a superior revelation in knowing that Jesus is Lord and Saviour of the universe and He spoke to us and revealed God to us. In the Old Testament, they could only capture a shadow of the cross but we see the magnificence of the cross which testifies how horrible our sin is and how wonderful the Saviour is.

What does it mean that they should not be made perfect apart from us? Being made perfect refers to completeness/wholeness. The consummation of Salvation and the resurrection of the dead. We saw in our study of Daniel, in Daniel 12v2-13, that it talks about the dead in

Christ shall be raised and these alive remain until the coming of Jesus when we will be caught up in the clouds and the old testament Saints and the new testament Saints are united forever with Jesus.

This has been an amazing chapter. I hope that you have been challenged by it, I know that I have been personally challenged by it. When we look back at it, what have we learnt? We've learnt that Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. It is not about feelings but based on facts given by God. We've learnt that God works by faith and through faith alone, but never does faith remain alone. Exercising faith is the only way to please Him and receive His blessing. We've learnt that faith is not just something, but it does something. It's active. It's a gift from God through the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Remember what else we've learned, Faith is always tested. Real faith will become tested Faith. Faith may seem foolish but faith always conquers in the end. By faith we believe and trust in Jesus, we follow Him. By faith we walk into a future which is secure knowing that Jesus is already there.

Amen.