

THE WHITE-ROBED ARMY OF MARTYRS



Hebrews 11:32-38
40th Message
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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Most of us love a good story. When I was a boy in the equivalent of Middle School, I read many books about explorers and adventurers. My boarding school in England was divided into four houses, each with three sections. All twelve sections were named after famous British explorers. I was in Shackleton, named for Ernest Shackleton, the famous polar explorer. These were heroic figures. The men and their exploits were legendary; they were renowned. I was also reading about the legendary heroes of Greek mythology—legendary in a different sense. The stories about these heroes were fodder for my boy's mind.

We have been working our way through Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith. Here we have stories of the Heroes of Faith. What is faith? We are told at the beginning of the chapter:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for... And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:1-2, 6 NIV)

So faith has two axes. On the spatial axis, we cannot see God, but with the eye of faith we know that he exists in realms beyond our physical perception. He is there now in the heavenlies. He is “up there” as it were, in the supernatural world. He is also here with us now and he sees us. On the temporal axis, we believe that there is a future outcome to our present seeking of him. Earnestly seeking him here and now will bring a future reward. So we look ahead. Faith is not simply believing these two axes, but living appropriately with what we believe. Living such a life is faithfulness.

The first part of this chapter (11:3-31) has featured eighteen statements beginning “By faith”. Or, as I have preferred, “In faithfulness.” These have covered from Abel in Genesis 4 to Rahab in Judges 6. The account of the faithful heroes continues beyond Rahab, though with a different pattern. But faithfulness remains the dominant theme.

Today we come to 11:32-38. This long section (162 words in NIV) comprises just two sentences in Greek. It has a careful structure which can be a little difficult to discern in English translation, which uses many sentences. Most English versions do keep the passage together as a single paragraph. The first sentence is this:

³²And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched 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. (Heb 11:32-34)

What more shall I say? With this rhetorical question, the preacher further enhances the status of Rahab as the surprising climax of those eighteen *By faith* statements. With her, he has completed his

coverage of the founding figures of Israel, finishing with a Canaanite, female prostitute who has modeled faith for Israel. The preacher is concerned that now he has run out of time to describe in detail the heroic acts of those who followed Rahab—but he had to cover Rahab! He couldn't stop without her!

He now lists six names, familiar names, but without any actions. They are in three pairs, each in reverse order. Gideon and Barak were successful judges who delivered the Israelites from foreign oppressors. After each, the land had peaceful tranquility for forty years. Samson and Jephthah were also judges, but they were more problematic. They, too, delivered the Israelites from foreign oppressors, but they did not usher in an era of tranquil peace, and they had awkward relations with the rest of Israel. Samuel was the kingmaker and David was the first great king, after the false start of Saul.

Samuel himself told the Israelites:

“Then the LORD sent Jerub-Baal [Gideon], Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around you, so that you lived in safety.” (1 Sam 12:11)

He then immediately rebuked them for wanting a king like all the other nations, head and shoulders taller than everyone else. The people had a wrong understanding of what a hero was like in God's eyes. Saul proved to be faithless and unfaithful. Then God graciously provided David, the runt of Jesse's litter, to be king.

We can read the stories of these six in Judges and Samuel. But the preacher does not want to give any detail. He is eager to move towards the climax of his presentation.

Having listed six actors without actions, the preacher now does the reverse. He gives a list of actions without listing the actors (33-34). It begins with *through faith*, which will be repeated in v. 39. Through faith they accomplished great deeds. In their trust in and allegiance to God, they did heroic acts of faithfulness.

There are nine actions, listed in three triplets. In some cases we can attach these actions to actors, though the preacher has no interest in doing so. The first triplet lists political success: they “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised.”

Joshua and David *conquered kingdoms*. Solomon established dominion over other kingdoms.

Good kings *administered justice*. “David reigned over all Israel, *doing what was just and right* for all his people” (2 Sam 8:15). The Lord made Solomon king “*to maintain justice and righteousness*” (1 Kgs 10:9). Saul never did so. Doing justice meant establishing and maintaining a society in which all flourished, especially the weak and vulnerable.

They *received the promises*. David received the promise of a son. Solomon received the promise of wisdom and of the Lord God filling the temple with his presence.

The second triplet lists escapes from death: they “shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the

sword.” Daniel was preserved in the lions den (Dan 6). His three friends were unharmed in the blazing fiery furnace (Dan 3). Elijah (1 Kgs 19:1-8) and Jeremiah (Jer 26:23-24) both escaped being put to the sword.

The third triplet lists military success: their “weakness was turned to strength,” they “became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.” Samson’s weakness after his haircut was turned into strength for his final heroic action against the Philistines (Judg 16).

These unnamed heroes did heroic deeds, all through faith. They were faithful to God and he was faithful to them, empowering them to these great endeavors. This list of nine actions is a catalog of triumphant success. Through faith, these faithful ones succeeded.

The preacher has not attached names to any of these nine actions. We want to do so, and to delve more deeply into each of the nine. And I have done so a little. But this can hinder the preacher’s purpose. He is obviously not interested in individual identification. He is creating an effect. He adds layer upon layer of success, of triumph, of victory. This is what we like to hear: stories of success where the good guys win; where the white hats triumph over the black hats.

Through these three triplets, the preacher builds and builds towards a climactic tenth item:

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. (11:35a)

Women received back their dead from resurrection. Here, too, we can attach names to actions. Elijah raised back to life the dead son of the poor widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24). Elisha raised back to life the dead son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:11-37). These two sons were raised back into this life. They were restored to their previous situation. They would grow up and they would die again.

The second half of the verse is quite different, and really should begin with a “but”:

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. (11:35b)

Here the story turns. The ten-fold success comes back to earth with a thud. There were many other people who died and were not raised up back into this life. There were many other mothers whose sick sons died and were not raised.

But this is about the specific cases of those who were killed for their faithfulness to God. They were *tortured*. Literally, they were stretched out on the rack and beaten like a drum. The word then came to mean torture more generally. They were given the opportunity to be released from their torture. They could recant their faith, they could renounce their faithful allegiance to the one true God. The path to freedom was set before them. But they refused to take up the offer. They resisted passively to the point of death. This is religious persecution.

The first section is about those who by faith, in faithfulness, *accomplished great things*. This second section is about those who, in faithfulness, *suffered great things*. These are the martyrs. Both are Heroes of Faith and Faithfulness.

All the people in this chapter bore testimony to God in their faithful allegiance. Their actions flowed from the conviction that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him and seek to please him. But from now on, they suffer greatly even unto death. They refuse to recant, and they suffer the consequences.

There was sporadic action against the faithful prophets in Israel and Judah that we read about in the OT. The perpetrators were their own people, those in power: the king or the priests in Jerusalem. But

this verse describes a later period between the two testaments, a period of intense religious persecution.

³⁶Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. (11:36-38)

Again, we have actions but no names. Again, we can attach names to some of the actions. They were mocked and flogged. Worse, they were chained and imprisoned. Jeremiah, for example, was lowered into a cistern.

They were killed in gruesome ways: by stoning, by being sawed in two, by the sword. The faithful prophet Zechariah was stoned to death in the courtyard of the temple on the orders of Joash, king of Judah (2 Chr 24:21). Per tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt, and Isaiah was sawn in two. Many were killed by the sword.

They went around clothed in sheepskins and goatskins. Such did Elijah and Elisha. They were destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. They lived as outcasts.

Here the preacher inserts a parenthetical note: *the world was not worthy of them*. Their oppressors, persecutors, and tormentors thought them not worthy of their world. They were losers. But that is the wrong verdict. In truth, the world was not worthy of them. As several translations state, “the world didn’t deserve them!” Here we have a diametrically-opposed evaluation of what matters in life.

Because the world didn’t deserve them, they were not at home in the world. They were of no fixed abode, of no permanent residence. They wandered in deserts and mountains, finding shelter in caves and holes in the ground.

Why did God allow his faithful saints to suffer? Why did he not save them from their ordeals? He saved others, why not them? Our call to worship was drawn from Psalm 116:

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me...
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“LORD, save me!”

...you, LORD, have delivered me from death...
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living. (Ps 116:3-4, 8-9)

A few verses later we read:

Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his faithful servants. (Ps 116:15)

It is so precious that he will not readily allow their death, but will save them.

Jonah prayed a similar prayer from the belly of the great fish:

“In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
and you listened to my cry...
But you, LORD my God,
brought my life up from the pit.” (Jonah 2:2, 6b)

The Lord delivered even Jonah who had been unfaithful. It was only with his last breath that he finally cried out in distress. The Lord heard him and saved him.

But the time came when God *would* allow the death of his faithful ones. Not a quiet death at the end of a faithful life, but a violent death *while* being faithful and *for* being faithful. These faithful ones had the faith and integrity to remain faithful through their suffering, faithful unto death. They were not saved *from* death; they were saved *through* death.

In the first half of our passage, the faithful had success. The Lord's prophets even raised the dead. In those days it was the faithless and disobedient who suffered God's wrath and judgment. But the tide turned. The wicked prospered while the faithful suffered, even unto death. Indeed, it was the prospering wicked who killed the suffering faithful.

This paragraph (32-38) is like a big wave. Through the first half (33-34) it builds and builds, carrying us along. The wave reaches its peak with resurrection (35a). We are high up atop the crest of the wave. But then we go over the top (35b) and the wave crashes down upon us (36-38). Again we can attach names to actions at various points along the wave, but if we focus too much on that we lose the overall impact of the passage.

The death of the martyrs, of those who have been violently killed while and for being faithful, is a problem. It has been a problem ever since Abel. He suffered death for doing what was right. He sought God. He oriented his whole self onto God, bringing both his offering and himself. His spilt blood has been crying out from the ground for justice: "by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead" (Heb 11:4).

The key lies at the turning point, at the point where the wave starts collapsing:

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. (11:35b)

There was a resurrection for the sons of the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman. Just as there would be for Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41-42) and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:14-15), whom Jesus raised. These were all raised back into this life, to die again.

But the martyrs died in the confident hope that they would gain a better resurrection. They were looking ahead to the reward for being faithful.

This language of suffering is true of Jesus. The Jews of Nazareth attempted to throw him off a cliff and stone him. He wandered in desert places. He had nowhere to lay his head. At his trial he was mocked and flogged before being handed over to be crucified. He refused to be released from his tortuous death: a death that conferred maximum pain and suffering, shame and humiliation, degradation and dehumanization. He resisted the calls to come down off the cross.

Jesus is the supreme martyr in his faithful witness, through his faithful death. It is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that this all makes sense. He was the first to be raised in the better resurrection. He was raised into the new creation, given the power of an indestructible life. He has entered into his reward. He has passed through the heavens into God's presence. There he has offered his own blood for cleansing and for the sealing of a new covenant. In this new covenant sins are forgiven. And he has sat down at God's right hand.

We are called to follow him. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Acts 7). His witness started so well as he "performed great wonders and signs among the people." But after his speech the Jewish leaders turned against him

and they stoned him to death. As they were doing so, Stephen asked God to forgive them. There would be many more such martyrs.

Hebrews is addressed to a Christian community that is suffering, a community that is living in the second half of this passage. This Hall of Heroic Faithfulness is set within a call to endurance through suffering:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (10:32-34)

Some of their friends were still suffering. The preacher exhorts them:

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (13:3)

They have shown solidarity with those who are suffering for their faithfulness.

Martyrdom became a regular feature of the early church under the Roman Empire. The Christians honored the martyrs, whom the world looked on as losers. The *Te Deum* is a Latin hymn of the early Church. It starts:

Te Deum laudamus: You O God we praise...
The glorious company of apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you:
Father...Son, [and] Holy Spirit.

The white-robed army of martyrs. We read of them in Revelation. They have come through great tribulation and their robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). They are an army, but they have no conventional weapons. They have no power of their own. Their only weapon is their faithfulness. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14:4): in faithful witness, through death, and into resurrection life in the new creation. The army of martyrs waged a nonviolent passive resistance, following the pattern set by Jesus. They refused to be released at the cost of their faithfulness.

The development of the printing press enabled the wider dissemination of books. Since then the most widely printed book has been the Bible. For a hundred years the second-most popular was *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563), until displaced by *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). It remains the third-most popular book.

As a boy I read stories of heroic explorers and adventurers. I read about the heroes of Greek mythology. But for much of church history Christians have read accounts of the martyrs. These are the heroes of faith and faithfulness. These accounts have dropped out of favor in the Western church. The best-sellers now are about great acts, great success, successful ministry, growth, and so on. People want to be in the first half of this paragraph. Individual Christians and churches in the West may feel that they are being besieged or persecuted or discriminated against. But this is not what the martyrs endure. In many parts of the world today Christians live in the second half of this paragraph.

Around the world there are plenty of places where the church is genuinely suffering for its faithfulness. Each week in the e-news we

draw attention to the persecuted church in some country. This week it is Laos, where Christians have been suffering for the past fifty years. We provide links to Open Doors and Voice of the Martyrs so you can learn more about the suffering church.

Following Christ is not necessarily costly for us, living here in the comfortable West. But in past times it has been, and in other countries today it still is. These people don't have much power. What they have is their faithfulness.

Growing up in OMF I heard and learnt a saying attributed to Hudson Taylor:

*A little thing is a little thing,
but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.*

This saying actually goes back to Augustine:

*What is a little thing, is (just) a little thing.
But to be faithful in a little thing is a great thing.*

God will not necessarily ask us to do great things. We may hanker after doing great things. Christian leaders especially hanker after doing great things. We are called to simply be faithful where we are. God has been faithful to us. Through his Spirit he empowers us to respond in faithfulness to him and to Christ. Living faithful lives where we are is itself a great thing.

By faith (in faithfulness), we believe that God exists, that he sees us, and that he will reward those who earnestly seek him.

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