

HEBREWS 11:17 – 12:17

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3.4. More examples of faith (11:17-31)

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when being tested, offered Isaac; indeed, the one who received the promises was offering his only son, ¹⁸about whom it was said, "Through Isaac your seed will be called." ¹⁹He reckoned that God is able even to raise [someone] from [the] dead, from which he also in a figure received [him] back. ²⁰By faith Isaac, also regarding things to come, blessed Jacob and Esau. ²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and worshiped, [leaning] on the top of his staff. ²²By faith Joseph, when at the end of life, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel and gave instructions regarding his bones.

²³By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden [for] three months by his parents because they saw [that] the child [was] beautiful and were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing instead to be mistreated with the people of God than to have [the] temporary pleasure of sin, ²⁶considering the reproach of the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the anger of the king, for he persevered as seeing the invisible one. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the one destroying the firstborn would not touch them. ²⁹By faith they went through the Red Sea as through dry land, regarding which, when the Egyptians made an attempt, they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, having welcomed the spies with peace.

3.4.1. Abraham had such faith in God that he was willing to obey the command to sacrifice Isaac, the very heir through whom God had said the promises would be fulfilled! He trusted that even Isaac's death would not prevent God from fulfilling his promises through him; rather, God would raise Isaac from the dead.

3.4.2. As an old man, Isaac, like Abraham, trusted God's control of the future and in that faith blessed Jacob and Esau regarding their future.

3.4.2.1. Esau did not receive the covenant blessing, the blessing of being in the covenant lineage, being the child of promise. On the contrary, he

sold that right to Jacob for a bowl of stew and was unable to inherit it despite crying aloud for it as the Hebrew writer notes in 12:15-17 (see Gen. 27:34-35).

3.4.2.2. He did, however, in Gen. 27:40 receive a blessing of sorts regarding the future. Isaac told him in response to his plea for a blessing in 27:38 that though he would serve his brother Jacob, the brother of the covenant blessing, he would at some point break his yoke from his neck. To bestow even this somewhat backhanded blessing regarding the future is to express faith in the God of the future.

3.4.3. Jacob continued the pattern of being faithful throughout life by blessing Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh from his death bed (Gen. 48:8-22). The statement that he worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff refers to an earlier incident in Gen. 47:29-31. (The Hebrew word in v. 31 means either "bed" or "staff" depending on how it is vowel pointed. The LXX translators took it as "staff.") In that incident, Jacob bows in worship after Joseph swore to carry his body out of Egypt. Jacob's request looks forward to God's deliverance from Egypt, as does Joseph's request in the next verse.

3.4.4. Joseph at the end of his life expressed his continuing faith in God when he gave instructions about the relocation of his bones in connection with Israel's future exodus from Egypt. Guthrie says of vv. 20-22, "In each of these events death confronted the person of faith, who spoke of things that were as yet unseen."

3.4.5. It was by faith in God's purpose for their child, which purpose they perceived from something about the child's appearance that was taken as a sign of God's favor, that Moses' parents hid him despite the risk of doing so. His parents were motivated by faith in light of some kind of spiritual insight into his significance.

3.4.6. By faith Moses chose to identify with the people of God and thus to share in their mistreatment rather than to enjoy the temporary luxury and prestige that could have been his if he had sinfully ignored the plight of the Jews and identified with Pharaoh's house. In doing so, he considered "the reproach of the Christ," the hardship and contempt that he, like Jesus, chose to suffer through identification with the people of God, of greater value than the treasures of Egypt (since he chose that reproach above those treasures). He had that perspective because his eyes were focused on the eternal reward that comes only to the faithful of God.

3.4.7. By faith Moses left Egypt in that he by faith was used by God in bringing about Israel's release from Egyptian bondage. Not fearing the anger of Pharaoh in their encounters (Gen. 10:10-12, 28-29), he pressed on boldly ("persevered as seeing the invisible one") as God's representative in the contest with Pharaoh. His faith in the presence and purpose of God was essential to his fulfilling his role as God's representative, and that role was part of God's means of freeing the Israelites.

3.4.8. By that same faith Moses led the Israelites in keeping the Passover and smearing the blood on their doorposts so that they would be spared the

death of their firstborn. He trusted that this future event would occur just as God had promised and acted accordingly.

3.4.9. By faith the Israelites walked through the sea with a wall of water on their left and their right trusting that God would keep that path open for them, as he did not do for the Egyptians who followed them.

3.4.10. By faith the walls of Jericho fell in that it was by faith that the Israelites marched around Jericho for seven days, which marching was the obedience on which God had conditioned his promise to collapse the city's walls.

3.4.11. By faith Rahab the prostitute, knowing that the Lord had given the land to the Israelites (Josh. 2:9), hid the spies to protect them, and as a result she and her family were spared (Josh. 6:25).

3.5. Crescendo and conclusion (11:32-40)

³²And what more should I say? For time will fail me to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, about both David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped [the] edges of [the] sword, were made strong from weakness, became mighty in war, put armies of foreigners to flight. ³⁵Women received [back] their dead by resurrection. But others were tortured, not accepting release, that they might obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶And others received a trial of mockings and whippings and even of chains and prison. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they died by murder of [the] sword; they went about in sheepskins [and] in skins of goats, being destitute, afflicted, mistreated – ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy – wandering in deserts and mountains and in caves and the holes in the ground.

³⁹And all these, though commended through [their] faith, did not receive the promise, ⁴⁰God having provided something better for us so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

3.5.1. It would take too long to detail other men and women of faith under the old covenant, so the author gives a sample of six individuals from the time of the judges through the united monarchy and adds the general category "the prophets." Through faith these men experienced great triumphs in God's cause, which he summarizes in vv. 33-35a. But through that same faith others experienced and endured great hardship and suffering, which he summarizes in vv. 35b-38.

3.5.2. These men by faith won numerous military victories, governed the people, and saw various divine promises fulfilled (at least in a provisional

sense). It was through faith that the prophet Daniel was unharmed by the lions and his associates were untouched by the flames of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. David and several prophets, including Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah, "escaped the edge of the sword." Men like Gideon, who was fearful, and Samson, who was captive and blind, were made strong despite their weakness. And through the faith of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman received back their sons from the dead (1 Ki. 17:17-24; 2 Ki. 4:17-37).

3.5.3. Whereas faith brought triumphs in this world, it also brought suffering and the heroic endurance of it. The women of v. 35a received back their sons from the dead by a temporary resurrection that left their sons still subject to death, but there were other people in Jewish history who when being tortured refused to be released at the cost of renouncing their faith so that they might share in a better resurrection, the end-time resurrection in which one is raised no longer subject to death (see Rom. 6:9; 1 Cor. 15:20-23).

3.5.3.1. Hagner writes (p. 206):

It is of great importance for the readers, and for all Christians, to understand that the life of faith does not always involve success by the world's standards. The faithful person does not always experience deliverance; faith and suffering are not incompatible. Faith, however, sanctifies suffering, and there is in the midst of apparent defeat the appropriation of the promise of the future. The author offers his readers no guarantee of an easy Christianity. If in their "struggle against sin" they have "not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood" (i.e., being killed), as the author will say in 12:4, there can be no assurance that they may not yet have to do so. The immediate, temporal outcome (which after all can *only* be temporary) is not the important thing. Faith is what finally matters.

3.5.3.2. The author probably has in mind here certain martyrs during the period of the Maccabean Revolt, specifically Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother whose stories are recounted in 2 Maccabees 6-7 and 4 Maccabees 5-12, writings dating from the early second century B.C. to the early first century A.D. Koester writes (p. 519):

Among those who were tortured (11:35b) was the aged martyr Eleazar, who was told that he would "be released from death" if he violated the Law by eating pork (2 Macc 6:18, 22). When he refused, he was beaten to death. Seven brothers were martyred after him, each by hideous means. Voicing hope for a superior resurrection (Heb 11:35c), they declared that "the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life," (2 Macc 7:9; cf. 7:23).

3.5.3.1.1. Here is a quick background of the Maccabean Revolt. Following Alexander the Great's death in 323 B.C., his kingdom was divided among his four generals. Ptolemy I gained Egypt, and Seleucus I gained Syria and Mesopotamia, but for some years they contended for control of Palestine. The Ptolemies succeeded in controlling Palestine until 198 B.C., at which time it fell into the hands of the Seleucid rulers.

3.5.3.1.2. From 198-165 B.C., Palestine was under Seleucid control. In 175 B.C. Antiochus IV Epiphanes began to rule and sought to force the Jews to adopt Greek ways, which were contrary to their religion. This sparked a successful Jewish revolt, which began in 166 B.C., known as the Maccabean Revolt (named for one of its prime figures, Judas Maccabeus).

3.5.3.1.3. Beginning in 142 B.C., Simon completed the work of his brothers Judas Maccabeus and Jonathan in securing for Israel autonomy and freedom from paying tribute (even if not independence from Syrian influence and authority). This autonomy endured until the Roman intervention in 63 B.C. This period of relative autonomy is generally referred to as the Hasmonean Kingdom or Hasmonean Rule.

3.5.3.3. Appealing to heroic acts of faith outside the O.T. canon to encourage and inspire the people is the same thing we do when we cite the stories of Christian martyrs that are not recorded in Scripture.

3.5.4. Others, including prophets like Jeremiah (Jer. 20:2, 7, 37:15-16, 38:6), endured insults, beatings, and imprisonment. See also, 1 Ki. 22:24; 2 Chron. 16:7-10, 36:16; 2 Macc. 7:1.

3.5.5. Zechariah the son of Jehoiada was stoned to death after prophesying against the people (2 Chron. 24:20-22). In Mat. 23:37 Jesus describes Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it."

3.5.6. According the tradition documented in *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5:11ff., a Jewish writing composed no later than the first century A.D., Isaiah was sawn in two.

3.5.7. Many prophets in Elijah's day were killed by the sword (1 Ki. 19:10), as was the prophet Uriah in the time of King Jehoiakim (Jer. 26:20-23), who reigned in Judah from 609-597 B.C.

3.5.8. Elijah, Elisha, and other prophets wore animal skins (2 Ki. 1:8; 2 Ki. 2:11-13; Zech. 13:4) rather than fine clothes, and their itinerant ministries included more than their share of destitution, affliction, and mistreatment (1 Ki. 17:2-16, 19:1-19; 2 Ki. 1:3-15).

3.5.9. During Jezebel's persecution, a hundred prophets hid in a cave (1 Ki. 18:4) and Elijah fled into the wilderness (1 Ki. 19:4). Faithful Jews also fled into the wilderness following the seizing of Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes and lived like wild animals (2 Macc. 5:27). The world judged them as unworthy, but the reality was that the world was not worthy of them!

3.5.10. Despite the fact their faith spoke highly of them, commended them as examples, none of these heroes of Jewish history received the ultimate goal, a permanent dwelling in a permanent homeland. That ultimate goal is realized only through Christ's work. Because of Christ, all the faithful of God throughout history will share together in resurrection life in eternal glory. Hagner comments (p. 207-208):

Herein lies a paradox. God's faithful people of the past, remote and recent, have lived their lives in accordance with the promise of a great unseen, future reality. Although some experienced a degree of fulfillment in history, none have arrived at the ultimate goal, "the promise." That final, eschatological fulfillment has been delayed until the present. The reason for this is now given. God's people of every age constitute a unity and must arrive at the perfection of the *telos* together. . . .

Of course a basic aspect of the delay is the newness of what God has accomplished through the work of Christ. Since for our author all that preceded Christ is related to him as promise is related to fulfillment, no attainment of the *telos* has been conceivable until the present. God has planned (lit. "foresaw" [or provided]) something better for us. That something better is the new covenant with all of its blessings, which is "for us" in distinction from those of the past only because we are the privileged who have received it through the historical process. But in a more fundamental sense, it belongs to all the faithful from every age. We have begun to taste of its fruit already in the present – these "last days" (cf. 1:2) of the already present age to come – but we together with those faithful people of the past will yet experience the consummation of God's purposes, which may now, all being prepared, occur at any time.

4. Reject sin and fix your eyes on Jesus, supreme example of endurance (12:1-2)

Therefore, since we have such a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also, having laid aside every weight and the easily entangling sin, run with endurance the race set before us, ²fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

4.1. Given this great cloud of predecessors who through their faith bear witness to the church that God's promises are to be trusted, the author urges his hearers (and us) also to run with endurance the race set before them.

4.2. Doing so involves laying aside every weight, everything that might wear us down in the marathon of the Christian life, things like fear and doubt, and laying aside sin that easily entangles and thus makes running the race a tremendous chore.

4.3. Running with endurance the race set before us also involves fixing our eyes on Jesus, the ultimate example.

4.3.1. He is described as the author and perfecter of the faith. He is the "author" or "originator" of the faith in that he is the object of Christian faith and thus the one who brought it into being. He also is the author of the faith of preceding generations in that he is the one who made that faith effective for salvation; the blessings associated with that faith were underwritten by his blood. That also is the sense in which he is the "perfecter" of the faith. He is the one who brought faith to its goal, the one who secured the eternal blessings that are appropriated through faith.

4.3.2. He also is the ultimate example of endurance, having looked beyond the horror of the cross, scorning its shame, to the exaltation that was on the other side, his exaltation to the right hand of God.

5. Endure discipline as sons (12:3-17)

5.1. The discipline of children (12:3-13)

³By all means consider the one who endured such hostility against himself by sinners so that you not grow weary, giving out in your souls.

⁴In struggling against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of blood. ⁵And have you forgotten the exhortation which he addresses to you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose heart when rebuked by him; ⁶for [the] Lord disciplines whom he loves, and he chastises every son whom he accepts."

⁷Endure trials for [the sake of] discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son [is there] whom a father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become sharers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹Moreover, we had the fathers of our flesh [as] correctors, and we respected [them]. Should we not much more subject ourselves to the Father of the spirits so that we will live? ¹⁰For they indeed disciplined [us] for a few days according to what seemed good to them, but he [disciplines us] for [our] benefit in order [for us] to share in his holiness. ¹¹But all discipline for the moment does not

seem to be pleasant but painful, but later it yields [the] peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

¹²Therefore strengthen the hands that are drooping and the knees that are weak ¹³and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be dislocated but rather be healed.

5.1.1. In v. 3 he restates the need to focus on Jesus who endured the ultimate abuse from sinners and specifies the reason: so that they not grow weary from the struggle and give up the faith. As he was blessed through his patient endurance, so will they (and we) be.

5.1.2. Unlike what Jesus endured, they had not yet shed their blood in their struggle against sin, in their struggle against denying him in the face of hostility. Given what Jesus endured, they can endure the lesser pressure they were facing.

5.1.3. He asks if they have forgotten the exhortation God addressed to his children in Prov. 3:11-12 (LXX). The essence of these verses is that God's discipline should not be considered insignificant or be a source of discouragement because it is an expression of God's love and an indication that the objects of that discipline are true sons and daughters.

5.1.4. The author says in essence in v. 7b-8 that the mistreatment they are facing because of their allegiance to Christ is not an indication of God's absence or inattention; on the contrary, it is a sign that they truly are children of God.

5.1.5. He says in v. 9 that given how they respected their human fathers in response to their discipline, they should much more submit to their heavenly Father in response to his discipline. In other words, rather than wavering in loyalty to him because of persecution they should be all the more surrendered to him, which is the path of life. For our human fathers disciplined us from a fallible perspective and for more limited and mundane objectives – according to what seemed good to them – but God disciplines us with perfect insight into our benefit in order that we may share in his holiness.

5.1.6. The writer acknowledges that all discipline is painful when being administered, but what it produces is worth the pain. The Lord's discipline yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Hagner remarks (p. 219):

The fruit of righteousness is called peaceful (*eirēnikos*) because it is the resolution of the "struggle" (v. 4) brought about by the sufferings of the present time. The latter must always find their truest answer in the final consummation of all things, but this cannot be allowed to weaken the author's emphasis on the experience of realized eschatology, to which he will turn in 12:18ff.

5.1.7. Verse 12 calls the hearers to renew their determination to live faithfully for Christ in the face of their spiritual and emotional fatigue represented in the description from Isa. 35:3 (LXX) of hands that are drooping and knees that are weak. The call in v. 13 to make straight or level paths for their feet is a call for them to choose God's way of holy living so that the lame, meaning those having been crippled by spiritual discouragement, will be healed rather than experience the more serious spiritual condition described as being disabled or dislocated. They need to rededicate themselves to living the Christian life, with all that entails.

5.2. The importance of choosing holiness (12:14-17)

¹⁴Pursue peace with everyone, and [pursue] the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵Take care that no one falls short of the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble and by it many become defiled, ¹⁶that no one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he did not find a place for repentance, though he sought it with tears.

5.2.1. In living the Christian life, they are to pursue peace, harmonious relationships, with everyone and are to pursue the holiness that is necessary to "see the Lord." Without sanctification of life, without a transformed life that is dedicated to God, one will not "see the Lord" in the sense one will not enter the heavenly city, will not enter into God's presence for eternity.

5.2.2. He urges the community to take care that none of them turns from the faith so as to miss the grace of God, and then he reinforces that appeal by referring to Deut. 29:18 and the story of Esau from Genesis 25 and 27.

5.2.2.1. The exhortation for them to take care that no bitter root spring up causing trouble and defiling many is a reference to Moses' charge to the people in Deut. 29:18. The bitter root in that context is the person who turns from the Lord to serve other gods. The Hebrew writer is telling the church to work to prevent those in its midst from turning away from Christ. That not only will cause those individuals to miss the grace of God, but it may well have a deleterious effect on others (will defile them).

5.2.2.2. Though intertestamental literature developed a picture of Esau as being sexually immoral for having married Hittite women (Gen. 26:34), the reference here to his being "sexually immoral" may be a metaphor for his being faithless. The point is that Esau allowed something as insignificant as brief physical hunger to cause him to surrender something of great value, his inheritance rights, and the consequences of that choice became irrevocable when Isaac blessed Jacob. He could not find a place for repentance, a way to undo the blessing, despite seeking it with tears. Guthrie writes (p. 405), "The author of Hebrews wishes to drive home the

point that only tears and rejection await those who sell out the inheritance that God promises to his children." It brings to mind Lk. 13:22-28.

5.2.3. Brothers and sisters in Christ have a duty to be involved in one another's lives, to "be up in one another's business." It is unspiritual to meet loving and appropriate acts of concern with resentment or hostility.

5.2.4. Guthrie cites in his commentary a letter from the persecuted believers of Vienna and Lyons to the churches of Asia and Phrygia, dated A.D. 177. We know of the letter because Eusebius quotes it in Book 5, chapter 1 of his early fourth-century work *The History of the Church*. After praising the faith and strength of a martyr named Vettius, the Christians wrote:

Then the rest fell into two groups. It was clear that some were ready to be the first Gallic martyrs: they made full confession of their testimony with great eagerness. It was equally clear that others were not ready, that they had not been trained and were still flabby, in no fit condition to face the strain of a struggle to the death. Of these some ten proved stillborn, causing us great distress and inexpressible grief, and damping the enthusiasm of those not yet arrested. However, in spite of the agonies they [the martyrs] were suffering, these people [the unprepared] stayed with the martyrs and did not desert them. But at the same time we were all tormented by doubts about their confessing Christ: we were not afraid of the punishments inflicted, but looking to the outcome and dreading lest anyone might fall away.

Guthrie concludes (p. 415) with these powerful words:

The emotional grief and dread caused by the specter of apostasy in this ancient church should cause us to pause for reflection. How do we respond to the apostasy of those from within our churches? Is there an intensity of grief and dread over this problem? If not, why not? What is there in our theological or cultural makeup that tempts us to accept apostasy as of minimal importance? If you as an individual are struggling with following the example of Esau, treating God's promised inheritance as if it was of little consequence, have you stopped to consider the impact of that decision on those around you? Your close associates in the church? Those in your Bible study? Your spouse and closest friends? Your children? Your pastor? Please stop and consider the curse of being one who introduces a bitter root to the church of the living God! In doing so you not only affect yourself, but you also contaminate others in such a way that will mark your life and theirs forever.