

Hebrews 11v20-31

Faith is the Victory!

It's a real joy to be with you all this morning and my sincere thanks to Peter for the warm welcome. At the moment, on Sunday mornings, we're going through a series based on the book of Hebrews - today, we find ourselves back again in the Academy of Faith in Hebrews 11. The Puritan writer, Richard Sibbes, called this chapter 'a little book of martyrs.'

First off was Abel who was worshipping by faith, and then there was Enoch who was walking by faith; the third portrait in this gallery of all-time greats is Noah and he was working by faith ... by any stretch, that's an illustrious trio of 'ancients' who were around before the Flood. And each one is warmly commended by God - and that's more than a round of applause or a 'like' on Facebook. It's God giving you the thumbs-up!

The next one up is Abraham, he's called 'a friend of God' on the pages of Scripture, and he is hailed by Paul in Romans 4 as the 'father of faith' - he is the first of the three patriarchs, the other two are Isaac and Jacob, and we'll have more to say about them in a minute.

I love the way we read of these stellar individuals in verse 13, that 'all these people were still living by faith when they died.' Isn't that tremendous - it seems to me there are two unmissable truths in that statement: one, in running the race with endurance, they lived well and, two, when they

crossed the finish line in a blaze of God's glory, they died well ... they lived well and died well, that begs the question: What was their secret? Well, by faith, they were 'looking unto Jesus' and trusting God for better days on ahead. Theirs was the mindset which said, the best is yet to come. They were patiently waiting for the promises of God to ripen. They were living life in the future tense; to a man, they were 'longing, yearning, for a better country - a heavenly one.'

These folks were not settlers, they were aliens, they were pilgrims in transit, en-route to a better land. You see, living by faith is not living in the past, it is living today with an eye on tomorrow! It perseveres ... like William Carey, faith means we plod on, one step at a time.

For each of them, and here's a good definition of faith: faith is believing in advance what only makes sense in reverse! For them and for us, that's where the rubber of faith hits the road.

So much in your life and mine - the hills and the valleys, the best of times and worst of times - all these experiences only make sense when we view them through a rearview mirror - 20/20 vision - that's where faith overcomes, faith accepts that Father knows best, and faith secures the victory! It's worth pointing out that all these men and women listed in Hebrews 11 have so much in common - they have their frustrations and their

fears, they have their foibles and their failings, they have their flaws, sure they do ... they're not an elite few with an elitist brand of faith - far from it, they are plain ordinary people with feet of clay. it's fair to say, that those pilgrims who have come to the end of the track and then stepped over to the other side - they didn't always pick up a gold medal for their life and walk of faith, sometimes they collected scars - but they all passed the final test with flying colours!

Did you notice that not a single mention is made of their failures in this monumental chapter. Yes, there are things in your life and mine which the Lord in his mercy and grace and kindness chooses not to remember. That's good news!

In the sovereign purposes of a good God, there is something else which knit their lives together - they had faith, simple faith, risky faith, childlike faith, sometimes shaky faith, God-focused faith ...

10 times do we read in this section stretching from verse 20 down to verse 31, 'by faith, so-and-so did this ... by faith, so-and-so did that.'

You can see what's happening, can't you? Here we are, walking on the marbled floor of God's Hall of Fame, we pause for a moment at each portrait, we listen to every story, and then the penny drops ... there's a 'lightbulb' moment when it dawns on us that these men and women are real people, with real faith, in the real world.

I want to give you a thumbnail sketch of four of the men who are mentioned here - Isaac, Jacob,

Joseph, and Moses - I have to say, this quartet is as different as chalk and cheese.

Number one is Isaac in verse 20 - he was the son of a famous father, and the father of a famous son. His own life seems boringly mundane, except for the altar experience on Mount Moriah, when Jehovah Jireh provided a lamb as a last-minute substitute, and that's recorded in Genesis 22 and up the page in verses 17-19. Isaac had a truly remarkable birth but, beyond that, he seems pretty much like Mr Average.

Can you see Isaac, he's well on in years, and he's communicating these promises and prophecies to Jacob and Esau. He said something like this: 'Listen, boys, there's a glorious city on the horizon ... there's a better country over there ... there's a coming Messiah; life on earth isn't all there is - it's time to look ahead, there is a future ...'

Number two is in verse 21 - Jacob ... what a contrast! Here we meet the master schemer himself - here is the manipulator of men and events. At birth, he grabbed his twin brother by the heel - then he spent the rest of his life trying to trip up anybody who got in the way of his plans. Here is a man who is so twisted that he could hide behind a corkscrew. It's all there in the book of Genesis ...

He saw visions, he wrestled with God and walked with a limp thereafter, he produced a big family, he died in peace after a lifetime of war. To be

honest, you would never believe that Jacob came from the loins of Isaac. See what he does?

He's an old man, he has a unique blessing for Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph; did you see how he did it, he's leaning on the top of his staff - that staff was a symbol of his life as a pilgrim. Abraham had his tent and his altar - Isaac had his tent and his freshly dug wells - Jacob had his tent and his staff!

The Bible says that 'he worshipped.' Ah, that is extra special ... in spite of all his yesterdays and his distorted outlook on life, that's the best way for any man to leave this world ... worshipping his great God. He ended well.

Number three in verse 22 is Joseph - of him, we can only say good things. No matter what page you read in his biography, Joseph shows up as the knight in shining armour. For one reason or another, he was persecuted by his brothers, they sold him off, yet he refused to carry a grudge and seek revenge. They didn't like him at all, and from Day One they had it in for him, big time.

When he was tempted to defile himself by Potiphar's wife, he did a runner rather than sin against the Lord. He was forced to serve when he was destined to rule - he patiently waited and trusted that his dreams would not turn into a set of nightmares ... I ask the question: Is Joseph the son of Jacob? You bet, he is.

Here's a golden nugget in the text - did you see it: it's all about 'the bones' of Joseph! I love this.

They're mentioned a few times in the Bible. I can hear him say a few words to his family in Genesis 50:

'You know, I've lived here in Egypt just about all of my life, but I'm not an Egyptian, I'm a Hebrew, I'm a Jew. And I don't want my bones put in a pagan pyramid on the shores of the Nile - no, I want my bones to experience the coming resurrection in the land of promise. I want to go home.'

You see, Joseph knew where he belonged ... in Canaan! And he knew what he believed. He died, but the gospel promise didn't!

Quite a legacy, no doubts there. You see, for him and them, when it comes to faith, there's only one way to go and it is onward and upward ... the old hymn says, 'forward be our watchword.'

Here's something to ponder? How did Joseph know of God's promise to the nation and people of Israel? He had been told about it by Jacob, who had been told by Isaac, who had been told by Abraham ..! Amazing, isn't it. That's the 'tell it from one generation to the next generation' principle in action. Passing on the baton of truth. It's also a pertinent reminder that salvation is not hereditary, but it often runs in families.

Number four is Moses, and beginning at verse 23, there's more said about him than anyone else in this section ... as someone has said, he saw the invisible, he chose the imperishable, and he did the impossible! Moses was one of the greatest religious and political leaders of all time, he was

Israel's greatest lawgiver, he was a great historian and writer for he penned the first five books of the OT, aka the Pentateuch,

he was acclaimed by the Lord Jesus as Israel's greatest saint for he was marked by the rare qualities of meekness and humility, he was Israel's greatest deliverer as we know from the dramatic story of the exodus ...

We read that his parents, Amram and Jochebed, had faith to disobey the laws of Egypt in verse 23 because they saw Moses 'was no ordinary child' - somehow they knew he was marked out for something different, so they were willing to risk their lives in order to save his; like his parents, Moses had the gutsy faith to say 'no' for we read: he chose to defy the life of Egypt in verses 24-26 when he willingly turned his back on a life of riches, and pomp, and splendour - the prince of Egypt walked away from it all and he never once looked back - no regrets; one heroic decision, a faith-driven choice, and he went from riches to rags - his decision reflects the same sort of priority as that shown by the legendary English missionary to China, C T Studd, when he said: 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.' he had faith to depart from the land of Egypt in verses 27-29 ... there were ten plagues in all, and the final one resulted in the killing of the firstborn - but in Jewish homes, where the lamb was slain and the blood applied to the lintel and doorposts,

the angel of death saw the blood and passed on by ... a foretaste of Christ our Passover sacrificed for us!

When it comes to Moses, he ended up buried in an unmarked grave - aside from a few moments with Elijah and the Lord Jesus on snow-capped Mount Hermon, the Mount of Transfiguration, he never entered the land of Canaan to which he led millions of people to inherit - he never regained the luxury of a palace or the status of royalty ... but, deep in his heart, Moses knew that a bigger payday was imminent - you see, that's where faith made a mega difference in his outlook and in his up-look. Faith meant he was willing to leave the familiar - it meant he was willing to do the unusual. For Moses, his faith never lost sight of the end goal.

See what I mean - four different eggs in one basket - yet, each one is eulogised for his faith. That's a powerful reminder that God sees things from a different perspective than we do ... the living Lord sees from the vantage point of a higher throne. And for us, that is massively reassuring!

Each of these men are from a bygone era, the dim and distant past ... but they had one common denominator - there was faith in the family and it was served up day after day, and it nourished and influenced generations to come. These guys knew the blessing of what David called in Psalm 16:6, 'a goodly heritage' or 'a beautiful inheritance.'

If that is to happen in our experience, two things need to be realised - **one**, we must think of our homes as a training base, not a holding pen ... our homes should be a launch pad for sending our families out into the real world, not a storage facility for isolating them from it; and, **two**, we must develop in our homes a contagious confidence in the Lord - the home should be the anvil upon which our faith is forged, not a vat of cold water where it is quenched.

As we come to a close, let's take a quick look at verses 29-31, where the torchlight shines on a few miracles and the supernatural - one look at the text and you'll discover... it's all about **water** in verse 29, and **walls** in verse 30, and a **woman** in verse 31.

We could write over this trio of incidents something like this: **one**, people are people, and nothing more - **two**, God is God, and nothing less - **three**, miracles are miracles, and nothing else!

The clear lesson emerging is that God does what he does because he is who he is! He effectively deals with all our enemies as in the crossing of the Red Sea - he can make a way when there is no way ... he removes all the obstacles strewn across our pathway as in the fall of Jericho when the walls came tumbling down - when things are too big for us, and too much for us, and too hot for us to handle, God always comes to our aid ... and it's always in his time and on his terms.

And no matter what went on in our chequered and colourful past, no matter how many skeletons we have in the cupboard, God can wipe the slate clean as in the riveting story of a Gentile woman, Rahab the prostitute. She didn't run a bed and breakfast in Jericho, as some have said who have tried to sanitise the story, she ran a brothel! It was C H Spurgeon who said that 'she was no mere hostess, she was a real harlot ...' Extraordinary. She was a dyed-in-the-wool sinner!

And so astonishing is God's marvellous grace, that her name is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. And here's why: Rahab married a Jewish man named Salmon ... they had a son named Boaz, who married Ruth ... Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed ... and he had a son named Jesse, who had a son named David. Jesus was born in the city of David because he belonged to David's family! That tells me, **sometimes we find faith in the most unlikely of people and in the most unlikely of places**. Ah, dear friend, only God can do that! Therein lies the genius of grace.

In closing, let me say this - these stories are not meant to intimidate us, they're meant to inspire us, to fire us up. All of these folks make up 'the great cloud of witnesses' we read of in Hebrews 12:1 - and see what they're doing today, they are cheering us on from the sidelines of heaven.

There are 4 take-home lessons for each of us to reflect upon and rejoice in: **one**, faith cleanses all kinds of sin - our guilty past is no handicap; **two**,

faith changes all kinds of people - look again at the list in this ledger of faith - our birth is no drawback; **three**, faith conquers all kinds of problems - in every challenge and with every hurdle, our faith is strengthened; and, **four**, faith releases all kinds of potential - for only God can bring out the best in us.

It reminds me of Jim Elliot and his four friends as they stood on the banks of the Curaray River in the middle of the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador. That was in January 1956. Their passion was to reach the most savage tribe in the jungle with the gospel of Jesus Christ - they were then known as the Aucas - today we call them, the Waodani.

All five missionaries sang together these words:
***We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day thy grace to know,
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing, We
rest on thee and in thy name we go.*** Within a few minutes, all five were speared to death.

I've been there, I've stood where they stood, I've sung those words on the same stretch of sand that is Palm Beach ... 65 years later, their legacy of faith and adventure lives on ... that's what these words in Hebrews 11 are all about!

For you and I, as we run our marathon race to future glory, when we're under pressure, when we feel the shrinks coming on, it's about trusting God in the dark times, as well as trusting him in the day time ... by faith, it's taking God at his word and believing him with all our hearts.

And that's the reason why we sing with real conviction: *We will stand as children of the promise, We will fix our eyes on Him, our soul's reward, Till the race is finished and the work is done, We'll walk by faith and not by sight.*