

my agenda for God, or is my faith in God? People who say, "I trusted in God to come through and he didn't." That reveals that your faith is in your own agenda for God, not God.

In order to have a faith that will help us face anything we must believe **there is something better**. (V.39) "These all did not receive what was promised to them." Abraham didn't get to see his descendants grow to as numerous as the stars in the sky. Joseph never saw the people of Israel leave Egypt. Moses didn't get to see the promised land. He died in the desert. They were all looking forward to something better. Suffering in this life is a stark reminder of this truth. There is something better. As wonderful as it was for the mother in verse 35a to get her son back from the dead, that resurrection on earth, was only a temporary resuscitation at best. Her son was still subject to disease and death and eventually died.

Here's the point, **faith believes that God is better than having it all or losing it all**. And so in faith we cultivate a confidence that God is better than anything this life can give us and God is better than anything this life can take away from us. So, like the woman who lost her seven sons, she looked towards something even better than the most amazing miracle here on earth, resurrection from the dead. (V.35) "Not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection." That woman did not get back her son on earth, she needed a better resurrection. That woman in faith looked beyond the suffering of this world to what lay ahead for her in heaven. She was not afraid of an earthly death, and so she was not afraid of anything. Do you want something that will help you face anything this world has to throw at you? Then look at the "something far better", than even a resurrection miracle here on earth.

Daniel's three friends could see it. When King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego into the fiery furnace if they refused to bow down and worship his image, they weren't sure if it was going to be a faith in God's triumph or a faith of endurance in tragedy. They responded to the king in Daniel 3:17, "O king...our God is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire (V.32-35 faith in triumph) but even if He doesn't (V.35-38 faith in tragedy) then let it be

known to you, we will not serve your gods or worship you." The faith of Daniel's three friends was not based on their agenda for God, it was based on God. Isn't it a relief to know that my deliverance or destruction is not based on the strength of my own weak faith, but depends on a far higher authority, on my God who loves me and will choose to deliver or empower me to endure whatever comes my way. It's such a relief to know this world is not the end, there is something far better that await us, a better resurrection. My faith does not need to see success in order to live and thrive and that indeed is success. In love God has provided believers with a resurrection that is even more powerful than the earthly resurrection of the widow's son. We have a resurrection to everlasting life in this world to come. God is better than anything this life can give us, or anything death can take away from us.

"Faith: Beyond Triumph & Tragedy"

Sermon Series: "Greater Than: A Study Through the Book of Hebrews"

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What if you had the kind of faith that could face anything, a faith that would be better than losing it all and even better than having it all? What do you expect from your faith? Do you expect the strength of God's provision to be directly related to the potency of my faith? When we pray in faith and God delivers a miracle, a healing, a provision, we celebrate, we praise and give much glory to God; And rightly so! But what if when we pray hard in faith and God doesn't come through with a miraculous rescue or resurrection, what then? If God doesn't deliver when we pray, are we to assume we have a faith that's weak and somehow lacking? If God fails to come through when we pray really, really hard, does our faith in God take a hit? Do we give up on God? What does that say about our faith?

God's word this morning is ready to bust open the myth that if we are sick, poor and miserable, then it is probably because our faith is lacking. What if God is calling us to a far different kind of faith. What is God calling us to a faith that focuses far beyond triumph and tragedy, beyond deliverance and despair, beyond miracles and the miserable? What if you had the kind of faith that could face anything, a faith that would be better than losing it all and even better than having it all.

Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 11. Hebrews is a book that continues to pump us with the words: endure, better, persevere, hang in there. Hebrews is written to people who are suffering. They are ready to give up because they have been so beaten down. They look with reasonable, logical eyes facing the brutal realities of life and God is not delivering them, providing and blessing in the way that they prayed for. They believed God but now it's gone in a completely different direction than they expected. Have you ever prayed and prayed for God to move, to heal, to provide, to deliver, but it didn't happen? Have you ever gotten angry with God for not coming through at a time you were vulnerable and needed God the most? Maybe you walked out of church never to return and it's been years?

As we read Hebrews 11:32-40 together, listen for how life worked out for the faithful people from verses

32 to the first half of verse 35. There is a shift that happens in verse 35. As I read verses 35-38, listen for the vastly different situations of these faith people who also made it into the faith hall of fame chapter.

We love to read verses 32-35 because they are stories of how through faith God delivers, triumphs and conquers. **Faith in Triumph**. Much of Hebrews 11 describes the God who can deliver from anything. Noah is delivered by an ark. Moses and the people of Israel are delivered by a wall of water. Joshua is delivered by a powerful unseen force that takes down walls of a strong city. Faith believes in a God who delivers. Many of the characters mentioned in verse 32 come from the book of Judges during a time when faith was weak and people "did whatever was right in their own eyes." At first read, I wondered why the author would include these people in the hall of faith. **Gideon**? He was a judge during the time of Midianite occupation of Israel. (Judges 6) The Midianites would wait until the Israelites had harvested their crops, did all the work, and then sweep down and take it from them. So Gideon was threshing his wheat, hiding down in a wine press. It's not working great because there is no wind to blow away the chaff, it's hot, the straw is falling down his neck. And he is constantly looking out for the Midianite pirates. At this point of weakness an angel shows up and says, "Hey there, mighty man of valor," What? Why are you calling me mighty? I'm hiding. I'm from the smallest tribe of the least important family. I am a nobody. Exactly. That is why God picked you. Gideon would gather 32,000 men to fight against the Midianites. Indeed, God decided that group was far too big and told Gideon to send home the guys who were afraid. 22,000 walked home and he was left with 10,000. God said, "Still too many". Test them by drinking in the stream. If they get down and lap like a dog, send them home. That must have been the popular drinking method because Gideon sent 9,700 home. With 300 men left and armed with only torches and clay pitchers...and God, They routed the massive Midianite armies. From weakness to strength they triumph through faith in God.

Barak was a reluctant warrior that had to be

prodded by the prophetess Deborah, assuring him God would give a victory over Sisera and his 900 strong chariot force using only a token force from only two tribes of Israel to show God would be the victor. Barak reluctantly trusted God and his use of a woman for not only spiritual strength, but God also used a woman to be the one who dispatched general sierra with a tent peg. (one of my favorite stories as a boy). From weakness to strength.

Samson was physically strong and used as judge over Israel to punish the Philistines. But he had a moral weakness. He was captured and eyes put out, but it was in Samson's blindness that he began to see spiritually. In a final act of faith, he prayed to receive his strength and pulled down the pillars of the pagan temple in final judgment of the Philistines. From weakness to strength and victory, **Jephthah** despite making a rash vow to sacrifice the first thing that walked out of his door when he came home, was used by God for victory. **David** in faith and profound weakness as a shepherd boy defeated the armored giant Goliath with just a stone and sling.

The author says he could go on and on with stories of how (V.33) by faith God conquered kingdoms, obtained promises and shut the mouths of lions. That last line most likely referred to **Daniel**, although David killed lions and Benaiah killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day, (another great story). Daniel gets thrown into the lion's den. It looks like he is dead for sure and God delivers. (V.34) "Quenched the power of fire" probably refers to Daniels three friends Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego, looked like they are dead, but facing overwhelming odds against them, God delivers. God triumphs.

(V.34) Some escaped from the edge of the sword, put mighty armies on the run, but by faith all "from weakness were made strong." The kicker is in the first part of verse 35, "Women received back their dead by resurrection." The writer is perhaps is remembering the woman of Zarephath whose son died (I kings 17:17ff) and Elijah prayed in faith to God and his life came back. Or perhaps (II Kings 4:18ff) the Shunammite woman whose son died and Elisha prayed and her son was raised to life.

I love to hear stories where God has moved and healed and restored and resurrected dead things to life. I loved hearing the story last week from a friend who had a respiratory health problem. A prayed in faith was offered

for him and he was healed. I love hearing the stories when doctors say, you have one month to live and then three weeks later the doctors can find no more sign of the cancer. I love to hear stories of how a business was going under and they were facing economic disaster and they prayed in faith and God miraculously turned it around. I have observed relationships I am very closely involved with have been decimated and I've written them off in my head as so dead it is impossible to resurrect that marriage. But then God moves in a miraculous way. I love to hear faith triumph stories. God does deliverer. God does heal. God does resurrect dead things to life. I have faith that God can do whatever He wants.

But...if my understanding of faith ends in first part of verse 35, then at some point my life is going to be rocked. Sometimes it's clearly God's will to triumph in divine intervention, to conquer over a struggle, but sometimes it's God's will to empower through the struggle, to bring endurance and sustaining strength in the suffering. To have **faith in tragedy**. Sometimes we have faith, not that God will give an escape, but gives strength to endure, strength to persevere in suffering. Sometimes it's God's will to continue in our suffering. Your marriage partner may walk out despite all you've done to restore. Your tuition money might not come in for school this fall. All your efforts, hopes and dreams for your business to provide financial security may all get wiped out. The one you so love may die. Your health may not improve. That relationship may never be restored. That dead thing in your life may never get resurrected. Yet, God's promise is still very strong, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." But God's promise is even much more than that.

Sometimes in faith God does not provide an escape but provides strength to endure. If God is glorified by delivering us, then He will do it, but if God decides that He will be glorified by not delivering, He will do that. The deciding factor is not whether we have enough faith or not. It's up to God. Do not conclude that if God chooses not to deliver and provide then it's because God is unable or your faith is somehow lacking. The whole point of the stories written in verses 32-35 is to say, "God is able to triumph and deliver, even delight to take our weakness and turn it to strength." God can and does move in powerful ways even when one's faith is weak and lacking." Verses 35-38 remind us that tragedy strikes

not only the weak and hypocritical and fearful, but horrific tragedy hits even the mature obedient and faithful believers. Godly Christians may well suffer through unexplained tragedy.

Years ago, on July 30th, a warm summer day near her home in Maryland, a beautiful 18-year-old girl, bright, athletic, full of life and energy, dove off a rock into the Chesapeake Bay. She misjudged how shallow the water was and suffered a fracture between C4 and C5 of her cervical vertebrae and became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. Friends of hers came to visit saying, "If you really believe that God can heal you, He will. Otherwise, if He doesn't heal you than its because you don't have enough faith." You see Joni's well-meaning friend's faith ended at the first half of verse 35. They believed that if you have faith then God will ALWAYS deliver, you will always escape death. Fortunately, Joni Erickson didn't believe that faith stopped at vese 35, the triumph part, but at times God gives faith to endure suffering for His glory, V.35-38. Joni has gone on, endured and her witness of faith has been an incredible inspiration to millions. I would list Joni in my great hall of faith and she would get a very big picture complete with little overhead lights.

Do you see the change in verse 35, "others" believed God in faith but it went in a completely different direction than they were hoping and praying for? Sometimes God calls us to a faith in tragedy. (V. 35) "Others were tortured, mocked, whipped, imprisoned, sawn in two (as tradition says that is what happened to Isaiah), left destitute, having the worst of housing, worst of clothing, ill-treated. All of whom God sustained by faith through their sufferings. All maintained their faith without any miraculous deliverance or miracle.

Did you notice in verse 34 some by faith "escaped the edge of the sword?" But then down in verse 37 some by faith "were put to death by the sword." Some escaped and some endured. Faith in God will hold both of those two seeming contradictions in its hand. In Acts 12:1-2 it tells of King Herod putting John, the brother James, to death by the sword and then in the very next verses it tells the story of Peter who was in prison, awaiting the same fate. But a group of people were praying for Peter, an angel appears to him and miraculously walks him right out the prison door free. By faith some escaped

and by faith "others" endured. David the shepherd boy rose from weakness to great strength and the kingship. While David's best friend Jonathan, was the kings son, demonstrated great character and courage and faith in God, yet lost everything and died in a useless battle. By faith some experienced God's powerful deliverance and by faith "others" God empowers with endurance, sustains in sufferings.

Look at verse 35. "Some women received back their dead by resurrection...but others were tortured, not accepting their release so that by faith they might obtain a better resurrection." Several commentators believe the writer may be referring to a story during the time between the Old Testament and New Testament about a mother who refused the offered release in exchange to compromise her faith. It is possible the story found in II Maccabees chapter 7 was on the authors mind. The New Testament writers were far closer to this time period than we are and knew the stories well. The brutal Syrian General Antiochus Epiphanes wanted to break the will of the Jewish people. He took prominent families and publically commanded them out to disobey God and reject his laws, by eating unclean meat or some public symbol of rejecting God. If they capitulated, gave into his demands, they would be set free, but if they refused they would be brutally executed. The story in II Mac. 7 is of a mother with seven sons all lined up before Antiochus. One at a time the sons were asked to recant their faith, but when they refused, the guard cut out their tongues, chopped off their arms, scalped them alive, then roasted them over a fire. Then they would turn to the next son in line and ask the same thing. The mother was forced to watch in horror, but still encouraged her sons to obey God and die courageously. At one point, she said to her sons, "It was not I who gave you life and breath, but the Creator of all things. I did not bring you into this world, but I believe in His mercy, God, will give back your life and breath. One son then stuck out his tongue and arms and said, "take them, for God will give them back."

We can respond to unexplained tragedy one of two ways. We can say, "Deals off God. You have failed me. You didn't come through when I needed you most; when I was hurting and vulnerable. I prayed and prayed and prayed and you didn't deliver so goodbye, I'm done." So then what does that say about our faith? Is my faith in