

STUDYING THE WORD, LOOKING TO JESUS, PERFECTING OUR FAITH - Part one

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Hebrews 11:39 - 12:2 - “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. [12:1] Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

This is a challenging text. Here’s what I want to do. I feel we need a longer than usual look at the context of these words. And then we’ll study the first have of what will be point number one. Next Sunday we’ll finish. I’m telling you this so your don’t panic when - after twenty minutes of teaching - you hear me announce, **“Point number one....”**

Hebrews 12:1-2 will almost certainly be misunderstood without the inclusion of those notoriously difficult words in **11:39-40 - “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” - IPAD TEXT**

How many emotionally soaring exhortations have been given, encouraging Christians to perseverance in the face of trial because, after all, there is a great grand stand of onlookers - the faithful who have gone on before - applauding and cheering us on. As I hope to show, that application, while perhaps emotionally stirring, has very little to do with this great text.

We mustn't race ahead to those opening verses of chapter 12, with their lyrical, trumpeting words about being surrounded by that "**great cloud of witnesses**" before we know who these witnesses **are** and why they are **there**. Because it's what God is up to with these **witnesses** that explains both the **nature** of the race we're in and why it so frequently requires **perseverance** through unexplained trial and suffering.

The tricky words are found in **verse 40**. Verse thirty-nine is straightforward enough - "**And all these** [those heroes of faith listed in the eleventh chapter], **though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised....**" They died still putting their faith in God's promised future fulfillment of His plan. They died looking forward in hope but not arriving at the goal of their journey. And we, naturally, admire their rugged persistence.

But then **verse 40** seems to twist things around, making the meaning of those two verses *taken together* rather hard to get a hold of - “**And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.**”

That last verse just seems wrong. It seems like it should read, “**And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for them....**”

God didn't grant their full reward in this earthly life because He had something better for them all. Their reward wasn't here anyway. After all, the writer of Hebrews has already told us **Abraham**, while he lived here on earth was looking “**forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God**” (11:10).

So it would just make sense that they all died in faith, without receiving the promise, because God had something better in store for **them**. Only that's **not** what the text says. It says they died without inheriting the promise because God has something better for **us**.

So Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Jacob and Joseph and Moses - **all** of these people were **intentionally** kept from receiving God's full inheritance of promised blessing specifically for the benefit of **you** and **me**. That's what this verse, quite amazingly, is saying. Think about that for a minute. God **withheld** blessing from Abraham to benefit **Don Horban!** It's almost too much to get our heads around.

If it's true, **how** does this work? How are you and I benefited by these great heroes of faith dying without receiving the **object** of their trust? How does their **loss** become my **gain**? I think the text gives two answers to that question. We'll consider the first answer from the **last** part of verse 40 and the second answer from the **first** part of verse 40:

First, if all those heroes of faith listed in chapter 11 received the full fruit of God's promise to them, you and I would be lost. That's what those difficult words mean in the last half of **verses 40** - "**....that apart from us they should not be made perfect.**"

Here is what we know about all of those saints who lived before Christ. We know that the full consummation of their redemption was accomplished immediately after the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The apostle Paul writes of a time when there were only 500 people who remained as living witnesses to these glorious events.

What if Christ had returned to wrap up His kingdom at that time?

What if the Second Coming had happened right then? Specifically, what would have become of you and me? All of those heroes of faith praised in Hebrews chapter 11 would have experienced their final reward - the full inheritance of God's promised redemption and deliverance. But none of this would ever touch any of ***us***.

They would have been made perfect, but it would have been "***apart***" from ***us***. And that's exactly what **verse 40** says God ***didn't*** want to do. He didn't want them made perfect in His new creation at the second coming of Jesus ***apart*** from us, but together ***with*** us. And His plan hasn't changed. He's still waiting. He's still allowing all sorts of good, wonderful, believing, faithful Christians to come ***on*** the scene and pass ***off*** the scene waiting for His deliverance and full redemption. And He still does it for the very same reason:

2 Peter 3:3-4,9 - "...knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. [4] They will say, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation'....9.... The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

But there's a **second** way, just as precious, **designed by God**, through which we receive great benefit from these people **not** receiving the full inheritance of their faith. It's explained in the **first** part of **verse 40**. We'll get a running start from **verse 39** - "**And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us....**"

Again, this is amazing news. God's plan from the very beginning was to use the **unfulfillment** of their faith to provide something **better** for us. We get to look back at the steadfastness of their trust in God over a long difficult haul. We get to see people, though **commended** for their great faith (**11:39**), still not fully **rewarded** for their faith.

And here's how that's providing something **better** for us (**11:40**). If we didn't have their example of persistent faith - **uphill faith** - then we'd be more conditioned to discouragement and disillusionment when **we** don't experience the reward of **our** faith. We'd immediately assume God was being unfair with us. Or we'd assume we must not be spiritual enough to qualify for God's richest blessings.

And God **knew** we'd find ourselves up against it over and over again in our walk with faith. But we have something **better** than many of these Old Testament saints had. They never had all the mass printing of Godly people living and dying with unfulfilled spiritual longings. But we **do**. We have **their** example. We now know that **nobody** receives the full inheritance of their faith in this life. We now know **everyone** has to wait with patient endurance. We now know that trials aren't an evidence of a lack of love or interest on God's part. And we know it from the record of these faithful yet not fully rewarded saints.

Of course, in the very same way, God also allows you and me to scrape through trials and pain and confusion in this life, as well as abusive treatment from others. He does this so **others** will be able to find hope in the ruggedness of **my** faith just as **I'm** to find help in the struggles of these witnesses in Hebrews chapter eleven.

Now we're ready to open up those precious, well-worn words in the opening verses of chapter twelve. And in them we find we have something else even more precious. I have three points:

- 1) **"SINCE WE ARE SURROUNDED BY SO GREAT A CLOUD OF WITNESSES"** (12:1)

The context tells us these words point us back to **chapter 11** - others who faithfully ran the same race. The text doesn't say these people are watching **us**. They aren't witnesses in that sense. In fact, just the opposite is true. **We** are to be watching **them** because they are reliable **witnesses** to the nature of genuine faith. We're to give them our attention. We're not to forget their lessons on faith.

Look at these people. **See a portion of your own experience in each one of them. And remember, against great odds, they all finished the race.** That truth is designed to put **hope** and **stamina** into everything we do to follow Jesus.

- a) **Noah (7) - "By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." - IPAD TEXT**

Noah is the picture of a man committed to **staying with a building task**. Against all odds and facing constant ridicule he exercised tough faith. There was every reason in the world to conclude God's promise wasn't true. Noah had so little to encourage his confidence in God.

We're specifically told to **study** Noah's faith. Here's why. If you're going to quit every time some small minded person ridicules you, you're never going to make it. In fact, our text tells us Noah's faith "**condemned the world.**"

That doesn't mean Noah **hated** the world or lived on some other planet. It means everyone could look at the outward **actions** of Noah and see that their own priorities were ridiculous and short sighted.

Noah makes me ask myself this question. Where does my outward life - not my **beliefs** or my **religious creed** - but my **observable outward actions** - where do these actions make the life-style of the world around me look short-sighted and empty of ultimate meaning and hope? Remember, God's Word came to pass for Noah. God is always trust-worthy. Noah finished the race.

- b) **Abraham (8) - "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." - IPAD TEXT**

Do you go through seasons in your walk with God, trying to do the best you can, but not knowing for sure where you're going? Do you ever feel uncertain about why God is taking you down the path you're on?

Remember Abraham. The central feature of his life was he set out in obedience on a course not seeing the whole picture - not knowing the destination. ***And He kept following in obedience when he couldn't see what God was doing.*** And remember, ***Abraham finished the race.***

In fact, when you're tempted to doubt God, when you just can't trace His hand on your life, Abraham is a good witness to consider. Remember this old man, who, with his barren wife, gave birth to an entire nation and prepared the world for the Saviour. ***Not bad for a man who didn't know where he was going.***

- c) **Sarah (11) - "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." - IPAD TEXT**

Do you ever feel called to a task that is beyond your ability to accomplish? Do you ever feel God is calling you to **give birth** to something you know you can't produce? I wonder how many people are here today who **had some goal in mind for this past year and failed**. And now, on the doorstep of the next year, you don't even believe things can be any different. **You think unfruitfulness is just in your spiritual genes.**

Or, perhaps you don't think you qualify as a person of very great faith. So you don't **deserve** anything from God. The writer of Hebrews says, as you run the race of faith, crack open your Bible and set your eyes on Sarah. **She actually laughed when the angel said she would produce offspring.** That's right. She laughed in God's face.

Remember Sarah. She was promised **fruitfulness** when all she could see was **barrenness**. And nothing but barrenness seemed even remotely possible. We're to apply this example to areas of our lives **where we find it hard to believe we will ever be fruitful again.**

Next Sunday - the first Sunday of the New Year - seems like a great Sunday to finish up studying what we need to learn from the rest of this cloud of witnesses. **Let's press into 2022 inspired and challenged by their example of faith!**