

## **A VERY DIFFICULT TEXT AND A VERY HAPPY NEW YEAR**

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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."

We will do double duty with these verses when we come to them again as we work through the book of Hebrews.

**Hebrews 12:1-2** will almost certainly be misunderstood without the inclusion of those notoriously difficult words in **11:39-40**. 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.

So what do all these examples of faith - those "witnesses" - actually have to do with us? What does Moses' unfulfilled faith have to do with Cedarview Community Church?

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 *you!* 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 **verse 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 from our present series through the book of

Hebrews 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?** 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**. God's plan would be done - finished - completed.

**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 **apart** from us, but together **with** us.

If that sounds a bit strange we need to remind ourselves that this is still the meaning of God's delay of the full manifestation of His promised redemption. 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."

I said earlier there were **two** ways the delayed inheritance of these Old Testament saints was for our good. 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.

These people are going to be a ready help for us in 2018. You are going to **need** to remember these people often as you follow Jesus in faith this coming year.

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. We have **their** example. We now know that **nobody** receives the full inheritance of their faith in this life. We know **everyone** has to wait with patient endurance. We know that trials aren't an evidence of a lack of love or interest on God's part.

Of course, in the very same way, and for the very same reason, 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:

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 apparent**

**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."

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. No one could help but **notice** the contrast between Noah's undistracted faith and their **obsession with temporary trivialities**.

Noah makes me ask myself this question. Where does my outward life - not my **beliefs** or my **religious creed** - but my **observable 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."

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? **Do you obey when there is no immediate earthly reward for obeying?**

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 reason. **And He kept following in obedience when he couldn't see what God was doing.** And remember, **Abraham finished the race.**

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."

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.**

- d) **Joseph (22)** - "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."

Long ago God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be taken into Egyptian captivity for about **four hundred years**. Somehow Joseph knew about that promise. **Nothing had happened to even hint at its fulfilment**

**during Joseph's entire life.** He now faced death with the yoke of captivity as firmly in place as ever.

**Remember Joseph.** In the face of certain death he continued to believe **nothing would thwart the plan and love of God.** He knew that his not being around to **see it** didn't diminish God's future for the people of Israel. God's plan isn't thwarted by death. Not one bit. Remember Joseph's bold confidence in God's word.

I'm reminded of Paul's great words in **Romans 8:38-39** - **"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Please don't miss the logic of that last phrase. Nothing will ever **"separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...."** It's not just that we will die still loving God. And it's not just that God will always remember us with loving thoughts.

No. There will never be **separation.** The relationship of love **between** we are Lord is **unending.** The **living relationship** I have with my Lord is a **permanent** relationship. It remains warm, conscious and active after death.

In a world where it **looks** as though death changes everything, **in God's plan, it changes nothing.** Joseph's command about taking his bones when they leave Egypt is given to remind me that **the truth of God's promise isn't going to be hindered by my death, or your death, or the death of any of your loved ones.** Our passing on has no effect on the truth of God's promise or His ability to include us in it.

We are **in** on God's future plan for the ages. His delivering work stands firm. **Remember Joseph.** He died not seeing God's promised deliverance. But he died confident in God's ability to perform His word.

- e) **Moses (24-27)** - **"By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, [25] choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. [26] He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. [27] By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible."**

Note those important words in **verse 26** - **He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt....** Faith grows because it is constantly **considering.** It doesn't just **declare** certain truths. Faith is constantly **comparing treasures.** Faith grows by **displacing false objects of desire with richer ones.**

If I look more to **this** world for reward than the **next**, I won't make it to the finish line. God's keeping power doesn't work for those who set their hearts on the pleasures of this world. God's keeping, sustaining, purifying power is only manifested in lives obsessed with the reward of the coming age of glory.

Moses is the classic example of an **unbribed** follower of God's promise. He is one who refused to be seduced or distracted by the visible, touchable, material world around him. **Remember Moses.** He shows us **what it takes** to inherit the promise of God.

And that leads right into the **final point of instruction in this great text:**

- 2) **"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"(12:1b)**

The **"sin which clings so closely"** is anything that keeps you from running the race **flat out.** In other words, it doesn't have to be something sinful **in itself.** Anything **becomes** sinful when it diminishes your spiritual **stamina** or **appetite.** That's why those things are called the sin **"which clings so closely."**

They are hardest to deal with because they're the hardest to come to terms with as being sinful. They are **close** to us. They feel as though they are so germane to what we are all about. They feel like **temperament.** We label them **goals** and **aspirations.** They're the natural **environment** of our culture. They're the things **everyone does** and **no one can live without.**

Are you going to continue to attempt following Christ carrying the weight of those things throughout this whole coming

year? Your soul won't long survive that inconsistency.

All these things - *even* these things - must be **"*laid aside*"** (12:1). This New Testament imperative is almost totally foreign to North American evangelical Christianity. **"*Laying aside*"** is the call to sacrifice other legitimate uses of time, energy and resources for the cause of Christ. The call is to ***relinquish*** as we race after Christ.

There are parts of my life that feel too precious or too essential for joy to just fall off naturally like dead leaves. You and I can't race after Christ without sacrificing much that feels precious only because we haven't yet fully apprehended Christ more deeply. When we ***see*** Jesus these ***clingy sins*** will drop off like ridiculous, useless toys. John tells us we will be like Him when we ***"see Him as He is."*** But right now it takes much more effort. These things must be ***"laid aside."***

Our text says we are called, not just to ***like*** Jesus, or ***think of Him with fondness*** at times, or cling to some kind of ***belief in His Person or existence***. We're called to ***race*** toward Him. We're called to pursue Him as the chief ***goal*** and ***object*** of our running here on earth. Listen, you're not in the ***rat*** race along with the rest of this decaying, perishing world. You are in the ***Christ*** race. That's what you're to be chasing and you must never forget it.

You aren't out ***for a stroll***. Because the finish line comes sooner than many think, ***lay aside everything that would hinder and dilute your concentration on the finish line.***

The writer of this epistle had good reason to be concerned about these Christians: **Hebrews 10:32-36** - ***"But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, [33] sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. [34] For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. [35] Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. [36] For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."***

Recall former days when you were once more drawn to Jesus. There are people here who need to do that as we enter a new year. Use warmer walks with Jesus like a compass. Return to a first love. And never, never give up. Remember the witnesses who have gone before. That's what their example is all about. Relate their experience to yours. Look at your life passing by. You only get one chance at the prize. Don't get side-tracked.