

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
Faith's Hall of Fame, Part 1
Hebrews 11

During a good part of our years in France, we had some next door neighbors named Gille and Jacqueline. Gille was a barber and his wife often helped him at the salon.

Over the years we had numerous discussions with Gille and Jacqueline about faith in Christ. And even in the last few years as I've made several trips back to our old neighborhood, I always stop in to pay them a visit. They're always polite and even accept my invitation to pray with them before leaving.

As far as I know, Gille and Jacqueline have never come to a point of placing their faith in Christ alone for salvation. Often in our discussions about spiritual things, they would simply conclude by saying « Quelle chance d'avoir de la foi ». In French that means, "You're lucky to have faith."

They, like many within the French culture, believe that faith is something you either have or don't have. If you've got it, good for you! But if you don't have it, you probably won't have it. For Gille and Jacqueline, faith was sort of like winning the lottery – many try but few actually win.

Some of us might get that impression as we read through this great chapter of Hebrews 11 known as the "roll call of faith" or "faith's hall of fame." Some of us might say, like Gille and Jacqueline, « Quelle chance d'avoir de la foi » (How lucky to be people of faith like that!). But don't expect me to have that kind of faith!

I suspect, too, that the Hebrews may have been asking, "How can anyone live a life of faith, particularly in days like these with persecution on the horizon?" And the writer is saying in response, "Well, lots of people have done it!" In fact, he says later in this chapter that he doesn't have the time or space to recount all those who have modeled genuine faith down through the centuries.

So what characterizes these people of faith that the Bible talks about? The first thing that stands out to me as I read this roll call of "heroes of faith" is that they ...

1. ...are people like you and me!

Faith is not reserved for the spiritually elite. In fact, as you read through this chapter you get the distinct impression that these so-called "heroes of the faith" struggled with the same character warts that so often plague you and me. Quite frankly, the personal resume for many was not impressive: Rahab, the only Gentile mentioned in this chapter (verse 31) was a prostitute. In verse 32, Gideon, Samson and Jephthah are all held up as examples of faith. And yet Gideon became an idolater later in his life, Samson was a womanizer, and Jephthah was notorious for his rash decisions!

By the way, what three individuals did God use to write the majority of the Bible? (Answer: Moses, David and Paul). Do you know what crime all three committed at one point in their lives? (Answer: murder).

Here's the principle: faith responds to who *God* is, not who *we* are. Great faith doesn't depend on perfection of character. In fact, faith is the *means* of seeing our character perfected. God in his grace works with the raw material of sinners like you and me. You're not perfect, and I'm far from perfect (my wife knows that better than anyone!); but God *is* perfect. And God is the object of our faith.

J. Hudson Taylor once said, "It's not a great faith we need, but faith in a great God."

We sometimes have the tendency to say, "Well, if I were just more mature, then I could believe God for great things!" Not necessarily. Faith has *God* as its object, not *you*. "Little faith will bring your soul to heaven. Great faith will bring heaven to your soul." (Anonymous). But great faith is nurtured first by who God is – the object of our faith – and not who we are and the level of our maturity.

That's also why (as Reilly pointed out last week) that faith is not invalidated by our doubts. To the contrary, our doubts – when approached correctly – can lead us into new, fresh perspectives of who God is, thus strengthening our faith.

2. ...have diverse life experiences.

People of faith are people like you and me. And people like you and me have diverse life experiences. You can't put people of faith in a box. They aren't all of the same country, cultural heritage or background. Gille and Jacqueline for years had the impression that we had faith because we were Americans. But for the average Frenchman who had two world wars ravage their country land, faith was a rare commodity.

But no, people of faith have diverse life experiences. They don't all look alike, talk alike, walk alike or die alike. Notice verse 4: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did" (Hebrews 11:4). But what happened to Abel? He was viciously murdered by his brother. He died a violent death.

But look at the very next verse. "By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away" (Hebrews 11:5). In contrast to Abel, Enoch had a smooth exit from this life. Like Elijah, he was just taken up to heaven. Now I don't know about you, but I would prefer to be an "Enoch" rather than an "Abel." After all, who wants to die a violent death, especially at the hands of your own sibling? But God doesn't give us the choice about many of the circumstances that mark our earthly pilgrimage.

But notice this – both Abel and Enoch were "commended" as pleasing God. "By faith, he [Abel] was commended as a righteous man" (Hebrews 11:4) and again in verse 5 "...he [Enoch] was commended as one who pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5). Did God like what happened to Abel? Of course not! It grieved God as he saw the natural consequences of sin beginning to manifest itself in a fallen world. But it's interesting that God isn't nearly as concerned by the contrasting circumstances of Abel's and Enoch's lives, as he is by the common faith they exhibit.

Remember, that was Jesus' lesson for Peter, wasn't it? "Peter, someone else will lead you where you do not want to go." And then John adds, "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (John 21:19). But then Peter looked at John and said to Jesus, "Hey, what about him? How's he going to die?" But Jesus simply said, "Look, Peter, if I want him to remain alive until I return, *what is that to you*. You just concentrate on following me."

Some of us may suffer like Abel, even dying a violent death. Others of us may like Enoch be caught up to meet the Lord in the air as Paul writes to the Thessalonians (chapter 4). But regardless of our diverse life circumstances, the bottom line question is: *Are we believing God?*

The speaker to the Hebrews emphasizes this well in verses 32-38. Notice what he says:

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David [these were all warriors who *fought* for God], Samuel and the prophets [here he mentions the prophets who *spoke* for God], ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice [like Samuel who "turned Israel back to the Lord their God"], and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions [who wouldn't think of Daniel in the lion's den?], ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames [or Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego], and escaped the edge of the sword [like Jeremiah did]; whose weakness was turned to strength [Samson]; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies [like Gideon and Jehoshaphat]. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. [But here there is a stark contrast...] Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷ They were stoned [like the prophet Zechariah or Jeremiah]; they were sawed in two [like by tradition Isaiah]; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated [we could think here of Elijah]- ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:32-38

People of faith are people of diverse life experiences. At times, God breaks through delivering his people *from* difficult circumstances. But in the lives of others, God doesn't deliver *from* the difficulty, but he does deliver *through* the difficulty.

These verses stand as a testimony against those who teach that faith in God always brings health, wealth and prosperity to the believer in the here and now. The idea of "Name it and claim it," "believe it, receive it," or "blab it and grab it" just doesn't seem to fit with the experience of Abel, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Elijah and most of all not even with Jesus himself!

3. ...are obedient to God in the face of unbelievable odds.

There's something else I see here about people of faith. They are obedient to God in the face of unbelievable odds. This characteristic of faith permeates the entire chapter! Notice, for example, verses 17-19. The step of faith Abraham took in leaving his homeland is nothing compared to what God would ask of him some years later.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. Hebrews 11:17-19

This was the last and greatest of ten trials in Abraham's life. All the other tests of faith in Abraham's life were designed to prepare him for this ultimate test. By the way, God often works that way. People of faith are obedient to God in the face of unbelievable odds. But I find that more often than not God is at work in our lives through lesser tests preparing us for the bigger tests. That's what he was doing in Abraham's life.

The Christian life is not intuitive; sometimes (in fact, more often than not) it is counter-intuitive. This is the "sixth sense" that Pastor Reilly spoke of last week called the "eyes of faith." In the Christian life, "seeing is believing" is not the standard, but rather "believing is seeing." "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Sometimes God seems to contradict God! It's one thing for God to contradict logical reasoning; it's quite another when he appears to contradict himself. God has given a promise to Abraham that through his descendent all the nations would be blessed. But now, in a paradoxical turn of events, God is asking him to sacrifice the very fulfillment of that promise. It just doesn't make sense!

When your experiences run counter to the promises of God, how do you respond? We need to remember that God's answer to the seeming paradox may not be seen until the resurrection! And that seems to be what is implied in this passage: "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead!" The ultimate fulfillment of God's promises in our lives is sometimes deferred until the resurrection. Now we see darkly as through a veil, but then we will see face to face (1 Corinthians 13)!

One other example of faith against unbelievable odds is seen in verse 29:

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. Hebrews 11:29

These people were able to pass through the most intense suffering and test of their faith, whereas the Egyptians were overtaken. Even small faith in a big God can enable us to move through experiences that otherwise crush the unbeliever.

And then finally, look at the next verse:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days. Hebrews 11:30

Nothing could be more stupid from a human standpoint! From the standpoint of military strategy, this is the epitome of foolishness. Jericho was the most invincible city in Palestine at the

time. And Israel had no siege ramps, no catapults, and no moving towers. They only had slings, spears and arrows. But...they had a big God who fought on their behalf!

It's similar to the experience of the disciples when Jesus came to them and told them to put down their nets on the other side of the boat. It just didn't make sense! They had been there all night, maybe floating around in a little circle. They may have reasoned: "What difference is several feet (the width of the boat) going to make?" I can imagine them thinking, "You (a carpenter) are telling us (professional fishermen) to do a (stupid) thing like this?!" But guess what? They obeyed by faith, and they caught more fish it nearly made the boat sink!

What about you? Where is God asking you to step out in faith? Where is he asking you to trust him in the face of unbelievable odds? Maybe it has to do with your finances. Or possible with a relationship. Sometimes he asks us to make a sacrifice like Abraham did, a sacrifice of the most precious thing or person in our life. How is he speaking to you?

4. ...believe God will reward in the future their obedience in the present.

We can be assured that, whatever step of obedient faith God is asking us to take, he will reward in the future our faith in the present. That's what verse six says:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Hebrews 11:6

And for the most part, that reward does not come in this life, but in the next. Notice verse 9:

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Hebrews 11:9-10

And again, look at verses 13-16:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:13-16

And look at the example of Moses in verse 26:

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. Hebrews 11:26

Don't you think that Moses was thankful that he made this decision? What about 40 years later as he had the opportunity to lay his eyes on the promised land and see just a glimpse of God's

fulfillment of his promises? Don't you think he was thankful then? Let's jump ahead by about 1300 years. In Matthew 17, Moses appears with Elijah along with Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration. There he was, talking with Jesus and Peter, James and John were looking on. Don't you think that Moses was thankful at that point that he made decisions of faith? And what about today? Today, we are nearly 3300 years after the time of Moses. Do you think that Moses today is still thankful that he stepped out in obedient faith rather than cower in unbelief? I think so.

Augustine once said, "Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe." And Moses and so many others are experiencing that right now.

During the Civil War at the battle of Fredericksburg, Robert E. Lee received a note that his daughter Annie, who had been preparing to be a missionary, had died. Because of the battle, he couldn't go to her funeral. But he did write a letter to his oldest daughter. Here's what he wrote:

Mary, we cannot go to her, but she has gone to Him. Your mother cannot go because she is an invalid. Our friends will have to bury her. But will you not now join me in rejoicing before our God? For of my seven children He has taken the one that I know was ready to meet Him. Is not God's providence good? In the midst of this evil, He has mixed His mercy again. It now remains for us to bring this cruel war to a close. And our family circle to be unbroken there with Him.ⁱ

What country are you living for?

So, "quelle chance d'avoir de la foi?" (You're lucky to have faith). Not exactly. People of faith are people like you and me -- people of diverse experiences and circumstances. But they believe God in the face of unbelievable odds, because they know that God will reward in the future their obedience in the present.

ⁱ Cited by Harry L. Reeder III, *Embers to a Flame* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2008), 169-70.