

Hebrews 11:1-12:3: Faith in Action (Part 2)

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Abstract

This session explores the endurance of faith as illustrated by the old covenant heroes and the ultimate example of Jesus Christ in Hebrews 11:1–12:3. It categorizes the exemplars of faith into those who experienced miraculous triumphs and those who suffered shame, torture, and marginalization as martyrs for their loyalty to God. Ultimately, the preacher exhorts the audience to recognize that they stand closer to the goal and must run their own race of faith with courage. By keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, believers are encouraged to throw off worldly encumbrances and embrace disgrace for the sake of eternal honor.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Accumulation of Examples (Hebrews 11:32-38)

A. Purpose of compression and abridgment

1. Create a vivid and strong impression of the endless parade of faithful witnesses.
2. Address the constraint of time preventing in-depth study of every individual.

B. Division of the examples into two distinct parts

1. Active achievements and physical deliverances (Hebrews 11:32-35a)
2. Endurance through suffering, shame, and martyrdom (Hebrews 11:35b-38)

II. Miraculous Achievements and Deliverance (Hebrews 11:32-35a)

A. Group 1: Monarchy and Military Conquests

1. Conquest of kingdoms (recollection of Judges and David)
2. Accomplishment of justice (characterizations of David's and Solomon's reigns)
3. Reception of promises (e.g., God promising David an heir)

B. Group 2: Deliverance from Peril and Death

1. Shutting the mouths of lions (reference to Daniel in Daniel 6)
2. Quenching the power of fire (reference to the three companions in Daniel 3)
 - a. Celebrated for steadfast loyalty to God

- b. Adherence to the first commandment (avoiding idolatry and continuing prayer)
- 3. Escaping the edge of the sword (contrast with those who died by the sword)

C. Group 3: Overcoming Majorities as Weak Minorities

- 1. Empowerment from weakness (e.g., Samson, Judith)
- 2. Becoming strong in battle and routing foreign armies (Judges, David, Hasmoneans during the Maccabean Revolt)
- 3. Relevance to the original audience facing a larger, hostile, unbelieving world

D. Group 4: Power Over Death (Resuscitation)

- 1. Women receiving back their dead through resuscitation
- 2. Historical examples: Elijah raising the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17), Elisha raising the Shunammite's son (2 Kings 4)
- 3. Contrast with those who chose physical death to attain a better resurrection

III. Faith in the Face of Torture, Mockery, and Martyrdom (Hebrews 11:35b-38)

A. The Martyrs of the Hellenization Crisis (167-164 BC)

- 1. Source materials: 2 Maccabees (6:18-7:42) and 4 Maccabees (5-18)
- 2. Historical context: Repressive measures of Antiochus IV Seleucid making Torah observance illegal
- 3. Specific examples of fidelity:
 - a. Eleazar the elder priest, the seven brothers, and their mother
 - b. Brave refusal to eat pork sacrificed to idols despite repeated offers of release
 - c. Brutal torture and hope of a "better resurrection" (eternal life rather than earthly resuscitation)

B. The Suffering and Death of the Prophets

- 1. Marginalization and extreme disgrace at society's hands
- 2. Types of persecution: Mocking, beatings, chains, imprisonment (e.g., Jeremiah)
- 3. Legendary accounts of martyrdom (from non-canonical texts like The Lives of the Prophets and The Ascension of Isaiah):
 - a. Jeremiah stoned to death
 - b. Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, stoned to death
 - c. Isaiah sawn in two
 - d. Uriah slain with the sword

C. Life at the Margins of Civilization

- 1. Wearing animal skins (sheepskins and goat hides) symbolises exclusion from ordered society (linen of craftspersons/merchants)
- 2. Wandering in wastelands, mountains, caves, and crevices

3. Contextual connection: Echoes the apokoresis (heading for the hills) during the Hellenization crisis
4. Application to addressees: Validating their own loss of social standing and marginalization

IV. The Reversal of Judgment and the Better Promise (Hebrews 11:38-40)

A. "Of whom the world was not worthy"

1. Reversal of who is judging whom
2. The faithful are not evaluated by the dominant culture (Greco-Roman standards)
3. The outside world's treatment of the faithful signals the world's disgrace, not the believers' shame

B. Limitations of the Pre-Christian Faithful

1. Attained attestation through faith but did not receive the ultimate promise
2. The promise is an eternal inheritance, a heavenly homeland, or an unshakable kingdom

C. God's "Something Better" for the Christian Community

1. "Something better" refers to Jesus, the better mediator of a better covenant
2. The pre-Christian faithful cannot reach the goal/perfection apart from the addressees
3. The priestly sacrifice of Jesus opened the new and living way in the fullness of time
4. Responsibility of the addressees: Running the final lap of the relay race without dropping the baton

V. Running the Race with Endurance (Hebrews 12:1-3)

A. The Athletic Metaphor of the Relay Race

1. Running a race vs. running a gauntlet
2. Contrast between caving into social pressure and persevering to an honorable victory

B. The Cloud of Witnesses as Spectators

1. Active onlookers in the stands, not passive testifiers
2. Stands filled with "past medal winners" (the heroes of faith) whose approval matters
3. Demonstrates that perseverance is achievable

C. Requirements for an Unencumbered Race

1. Courage and determination: Constant in aims in the face of hardship (reconceptualizing military courage)
2. Laying aside every weight and entangling sin:
 - a. Reputation: Shedding concern for external approval
 - b. Physical safety/body: Risk of harm
 - c. Property: Tension between possessions and loyalty to Christ
 - d. Sins: Idol worship and previous lifestyles
 - e. Warning to wavering members: Drawing back is a re-encumbrance

VI. Jesus: The Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith (Hebrews 12:2-3)

A. Correct Translation: "The Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith" (Not "our" faith)

1. Greek text contains no possessive pronoun "our"
2. Jesus is the climactic historical example of faith in the encomium

B. Jesus as Pioneer (Forerunner)

1. Blazed the path through hardship and shame for the joy set before him
2. Exaltation to the right hand of God is proof that his path leads to glory

C. Jesus as Perfecter of Faith

1. Displayed trust/faith in its most complete, perfect form
2. Went first and farther than anyone in terms of embodying faith

D. The Core Example: Crucifixion and Despising Shame

1. Crucifixion as the ultimate form of public degradation and shame
2. "Despising shame": Valuing the opinion of God over the outsider's evaluation (parallels Plato, Seneca, Epictetus)
3. Count as nothing the opinion of human beings (John Chrysostom)
4. Sufferings of Jesus as a patron's self-investment demanding reciprocity, gratitude, and loyalty

E. Interpretation of the Preposition *Anti* (Hebrews 12:2, 16)

1. Debate: "instead of" vs. "for the sake of"
2. Evidence supports "for the sake of":
 - a. Jesus' exaltation and sitting at the right hand of God is the "joy set before him"
 - b. Contrast with Esau: Esau chose temporary ease for a single meal, whereas Jesus chose temporary hardship for eternal honor
 - c. Aristotle's paradigm of courage: Submitting to pain for the sake of (anti) a noble object

F. Application of Jesus' Example to the Hearers

1. Encouragement: Jesus endured greater hostility from sinners, while they have not yet resisted to the point of spilling blood
2. Reciprocity: Weariness breaks faith with the patron who endured infinitely more for them
3. Group boundaries: Labeling opponents as "sinners" reinforces that hostiles are on the wrong side of God's values
4. Sharing in Jesus' hostility is an opportunity to share in his final entry into glory

VII. Contemporary Challenges and Application (Hebrews 11-12)

A. The Reality of Faith

1. Faith looks to God, His promises, and His future as ultimately real
2. Poses the question: Are secular agendas/tangible rewards more real to us than intangible rewards of pursuing God?

B. Ambition Focused on Pleasing God

1. Ordering all being and doing to please God
2. Recognition of the judgment seat of Christ (recalling Paul's words)

C. Living as Foreigners and Ideological Emigrants

1. Renouncing socialization in secular values
2. Re-socialization within the body of Christ to praise what God praises

D. Choosing Between Two Destinies (The Moses Paradigm)

1. Destiny of primary socialization: Wealth, fame, power, followed by ultimate regret
2. Destiny of faith: Recognition that temporary goods are secondary to the eternal prize