

## The Epistle to the Hebrews

### Lesson # 42 April 3, 2022 Never Having Received What was Promised Hebrews 11:33-40

#### Introduction

“Faith trusts in what cannot be seen, but it produces effects in the real world. Faith shows up and manifests itself in concrete ways.”<sup>1</sup> I am reminded here of a hymn we sing here at EBC – “By Faith”, Keith & Kristin Getty. When we sing it or even read the words, you can’t help but be reminded of Hebrews 11.

Gary Inrig, in his book called “True North,” talks about what our faith relies on: “The real question is the character of God – whether God is who He says He is, whether the God who is there is the God of Scripture. Faith believes that the God of Scripture, the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is. Faith rests and relies on the God of revelation – the majestic, infinite, holy God who alone is worthy of worship and service. Faith believes that God is, that the God who is, is awesome beyond imagining and that the God who is, is utterly consistent and reliable. Faith believes not only that God is real but also that He is worth knowing. “He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.” The greatest privilege in life is in knowing God; the greatest reward in life is intimacy with God; the greatest purpose for life is the service of God. He is good, gracious and forgiving. He is holy, generous and loving. Faith believes that God is worth seeking, that He is worth pursuing. Faith places the highest possible value on God Himself. At this point, the modern secular worldview collides with the biblical worldview. Modern man considers God optional at best, but essentially irrelevant to a meaning full life. Everyone is entitled to his or her own understanding of God, but it is bad taste to take Him too seriously or to insist that there is ultimate truth behind anyone’s viewpoint.”<sup>2</sup>

As the A.H. moves from the specific to the general for the rest of this chapter, we are supplied with example by example of, not specific people and their exploits, but the actions of unnamed OT saints who did what often seems impossible, except for God’s divine empowerment. In observing these final verses in the chapter, we can recognize most of the references from OT stories we are familiar with, and some that are perhaps more obscure or very familiar because there is more than one episode of that particular event in the OT. Certainly, God has recorded these events for posterity, and I was reminded here of [Heb. 6:10](#). Our ‘events’ are not recorded in the annals of Christianity anywhere. We are not famous. Yet, God is aware of our every step of faith, because He has supplied that faith, and He commends it, though we are not aware of that. For a few of the referents, we must look to history, tradition, and /or the Apocryphal books for the actual events being depicted. A couple of references to events are certainly mirrored in II Maccabees, which, although we do not consider it a

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 370

<sup>2</sup> Gary Inrig, True North, Discovery House, 2002, pg. 178-179

canonical book, does present some important history of Israel during the times between Malachi and Matthew – some 400 years. In between the testaments, Israel still lived on, and had battles against many enemies and encountered evil people who tried to affect the lives of God’s people for the worse, even attempting to eliminate Israel altogether.

## The Achievements of Faith

vv. 33-34

Here in v. 33-34, 9 things are said about the faithful saints – to some, this forms a parallel with the 9 fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. As faith is applied by the Giver of faith, it produces those actions that, in human terms, we are incapable of producing. These remaining verses, and especially vv. 33-34, provide us with unmistakable proof of that.”<sup>3</sup> Note also Matt. 9:18-22.

*“Who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice...” v. 33 ab*

“Conquered or ‘subdued’ (NKJV) means to fight or contend, to enter into a trial of strength, of courage in the field, to prevail in a battle.”<sup>4</sup> This phrase could refer to any number of those people we have already studied and discussed in class. But commentators figure that David and Joshua are possible referents here. Yet, we must also consider Moses.

But if the A.H.’s intention is to provide us with practical application, how does our faith help us to ‘conquer kingdoms’? What are those kingdoms we are confronted by that we must conquer or overcome? Pink identifies 2 of them; 1) within ourselves; and 2) the flesh; and 3) ( my addition ) the Devil. Note 1 Cor. 9:27; Rom. 6:19; 8:13; 12:1-2; I JN 2:15-17; 5:4 and James 4:4. It goes without saying that our battles against these enemies is lifelong – not just a one-shot deal! Fighting battles against these enemies takes perseverance. John Owen, in his book, *Triumph Over temptation*, famously said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>5</sup>

This phrase could be referring to passages like Joshua 11:10-15; I Sam. 24:10; or II Sam. 8:15; but in wider scope, it tells us that we are to live holy lives – cf. Heb. 12:14; Ps. 15:1,2.

If believers do not act justly in this world, being salt and light, then there is little hope for justice in the world. Paul’s words in Phil. 1:14-15 are quite appropriate here. In fact, it is the absence of faith and the substituting of self-interest ( or self-righteousness - per Rom. 10:3 ) rather than God’s interest that causes almost all of the world’s injustice and oppression, even today!

<sup>3</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Heroes of Faith*, p. 220

<sup>4</sup> Pink, p. 220

<sup>5</sup> John Owen, *Triumph Over Temptation*, an adaptation of a much older book by Owens – Victor books, 2005, Pg. 202

*“obtained promises” v. 33c*

For example, David was anointed as the 2<sup>nd</sup> King of Israel by Samuel in I Samuel 16, long before the reality of his ascent to the throne took place ( II Sam. 2 – King over Hebron ). David and his relatively small cohort of supporters seemed for many years to be no match for Saul and his army, and even after Saul died, for years the throne over the entire kingdom was long-sought after and occurred only in painfully slow stages ( II Sam. 5 ). Yet David persevered.

The application for us as NT believers should be relatively clear – we are not going to see the promises fulfilled in our lives until we bring about obedience and love for God being exercised according to His Word. James tells us – Jas. 1:2-8 – that those who are “double-minded” are unstable, and “should not suppose we will receive anything from the Lord.”

*“stopped the mouths of lions...” v. 33d*

The obvious referent here is Daniel ( Dan. 6:1-27 ), but we should also consider Samson ( Judg. 14:5-6 ) and David ( I Sam. 17:31-37 ), who also had encounters with lions, and the lions did not fare well. In one case, they remained hungry, in two others, they lost their lives. We should be reminded of the application for us, as Peter tells us in I Peter 5:8 and James reminds us in Jas. 4:7.

Verse. 34 continues the list of actions done by faithful OT saints, and includes 5 points;

*“quenched the power of fire...” v. 34a*

The most obvious example, and would have been odd if it had been excluded, because it refers to one of the most faithful declaration in all of Scripture, is found in Daniel 3:19-30. This is perhaps one of the strongest testimonies of faith in the entire OT, and is made even more amazing because it is 3 very young men, Daniel’s friends, who exhibit such faith, having been taken captive and put into exile in Babylon!

*“escaped the edge of the sword...” v. 34b*

There are at least 3 main examples of this; David in I Sam. 18:4,11; 19:9-10; Elijah in I KGS 19:1-3,10; and Elisha in II KGS 6:15-19.

*“were made strong out of weakness...” V. 34c*

There are more examples of this than can be mentioned here – but there are 3 in the book of Judges: Ehud in Judg. 3:12-30; Jael in Judg. 4:17-24; and Gideon – Judg. 6:15-16. We could also mention Samson ( Judges 13-16:31 ) and Hezekiah ( 2 Kings 20:1-6 ) here.

*“became mighty in war...” V. 34d*

Numerous OT warriors, and judges could be mentioned here – from Abraham and his war against the five city-kings who had kidnapped Lot in Gen. 14:12-16; Moses in Ex. 17:8-16, where Israel defeats the Amalakites, but in order to prevail, Aaron and Hur hold up Moses’ weary arms until Amalek was defeated. Or Joshua at Jericho and throughout the conquest of the Land – Josh. 10:12-14 where the day is lengthened somehow by God so Israel can defeat Gibeon, and God even pelts Gibeon with huge hailstones from heaven ( 10:11 ); or when God chases the enemies with hornets ( Ex. 23:28 ); and the book of Judges is filled with miraculous defeats of God’s enemies by Israel, once they are in the Land, as are the exploits of David.

*“put foreign enemies to flight...” v. 34e*

This is very similar to the claim, “became mighty in war”, and is the direct result of becoming mighty in war. Those victories were won despite the weakness of the people of God, because He fought in them and for them.

To Rise to a Better Life

vv. 35-37

*“Women received back their dead by resurrection...” v. 35a*

There are 2 recorded instances of this in the OT. Elijah raises the widow of Zarapheth’s son – I KGS 17:17-23 ( and Jesus, in His first recorded sermon in Luke 4:20-30 ( cf. vv. 25-26 ) mentions Elijah being sent to this Gentile woman, and the congregation in Nazareth rises up to attempt to kill Him! ). The other OT episode in Elisha is in II KGS 4:18-36, as he raises the Shunamite woman’s son from the dead. ( vv. 32-37 ).

It is entirely possible that the A.H. is also thinking of NT episodes of resurrection – certainly those of Jesus Himself, but also Peter ( Dorcas – Acts 9:36-42 ); and Paul ( Eutychus – Acts 20:7-12 ).

*“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise to a better life.” V. 35b*

This describes people who were tortured to death. There is no question that this part of the verse is describing those who suffered in horrible ways, but refused release, which seems to mean, they could have stopped the torture by some means of compromise or by refuting their faith, but did not do so. The price for them of refuting their faith was apostasy, and they refused to go in that direction – the promise of God was too strong in their hearts for them to dismiss it.

A number of the commentaries refer to episodes in 2 Maccabees 6:18-31; 7:1-7; 7:8-42. I have supplied these passages in an addendum at the end of the lesson, as I am

aware that many people here do not have a copy of the Apocryphal books, such as I & II Maccabees. These Maccabean texts tell the reader that those who suffer for God's sake will be raised to life again.<sup>6</sup> Since we do not, as Protestants, accept these books as 'the Bible', I doubt that this is all the texts that the A.H. refers to here, although these books would have been known as historical books regarding Israel to the people the author wrote to, and would be recalled by them in this sentence.

From a more biblical OT perspective, we should recall the ultimately fatal mistreatment that many of the OT prophets like Jeremiah, Micaiah ( I KGS 22:24-28 ), and many others who were abused and then finally killed , many times at the hands of their own people, and especially some of the most wicked kings of Israel! A.W Pink interjects a great point here, in part, citing the great Puritan writer, John Owen;

John Owen – “All the evils here enumerated, did befall the persons intended, on the account of their faith, and the profession thereof. The apostle does not present unto the Hebrews a company of miserable, distressed creatures, that fell into that state through their own default, or merely on account of a common providence, disposing their lot in this world into such a state of misery, as it is with many; but all the things mentioned, they underwent solely on the account of their faith in God, and the profession of true religion. So as that their case differed in nothing from that which they might be called unto.” Pink – “But not only were these sufferings encountered in the path of fidelity to God, but it was the exercise of faith which enabled those OT worthies to patiently and spiritually endure them. Faith is a grace which draws down from heaven whatever blessing of God is most needful for the saint, and therefore does it stand him in as good stead in the night of adversity as in the day of prosperity. Faith is a new creation principal in the soul, which not only energizes its possessor to perform exploits, but it also enables him to hold his head above the dark waters when floods threaten to drown him. Faith suffices the Christian to face danger calmly, to continue steadfast in duty when menaced by the most foreboding outlook, to stand his ground when threatened with sorest sufferings. Faith imparts a steadfastness of purpose, a noble courage, a tranquility of mind, which no human education or fleshly efforts can supply. Faith makes the righteous as bold as a lion, refusing to recant through horrible tortures and a martyr's death be the only alternative.”<sup>7</sup>

The people of v. 35b, were looking forward to a resurrection – a “rise again to a better life”. Isn't that what all believers look forward to? Notice Paul's charge to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:3-13, and 4:14-18. These are some of the last words of Paul, no stranger to suffering and deadly persecution – but he too anticipated a resurrection and a better life in that. Certainly, during his ministry, he knew what awaited him as he lived for Christ, and he knew it would be painful – Acts 20:22-23; 21:10-14. Paul fully understood the principle laid out here by the A.H in v. 35b.

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<sup>6</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 371-372, and Pink, Hebrews, P.871

<sup>7</sup> A.W. Pink, The Heroes of Faith, pp. 228-229

Verses 36 – 37 – The author continues to report on a list of sufferings endured by faithful believers.

*“Others endured mocking and floggings, and even chains of imprisonment.” V. 36*

The prophets were mercilessly attacked, mocked and scorned – mostly by evil Israelite kings, who felt they could not afford God’s Word cutting short their worldly, greedy plans or stifling their sin. Note II Chron. 36:15-16; 30:10. Jeremiah was beaten, put in stocks and left in a pit for his audacity to truthfully represent God to the people – note Jer. 20:2; 37:14-21; 38:6. King Asa imprisoned Hanani in II Chron. 16:7-10; and I have already mentioned King Ahab and his treatment of Micaiah ( I KGS 22:26-27 ).

Verse 37 continues the list – this shameful list of how God’s true believers and prophets were treated by those of depraved and unjustified souls. Notice how Jesus Himself responds to this shameful aspect of Israel’s history, especially how the very leaders of the people treated those God had appointed over them as shepherds ( cf. Ezek. 34 ). In Matt. 23:29-35, see His parable of the Tenants, which displays this history, and presents it as a run-up to Jesus’ own crucifixion.

*“They were stoned...” V. 37a*

This certainly applies to Zechariah, who was stoned to death for his rebuke of the people – II Chron. 24:20-21; MT 23:37; LK 13:34. According to tradition, Jeremiah, after countless times of persecution and imprisonment in a filthy pit or cistern, was finally stoned to death in Egypt. In NT times, Paul ( a NT prophet and apostle ), was stoned ( possibly to death – then rose again ) at Lystra – Acts 14:19-20; and Stephen, the first NT martyr, was stoned to death – Acts 7:54-60.

*“they were sawn in two...” V. 37b*

According to Jewish tradition, this was the fate of the great prophet Isaiah at the hands of King Manasseh.<sup>8</sup> FF Bruce, in his commentary on Hebrews, refers to this: “As for being “sawn in two,” this was the traditional fate of the prophet Isaiah during Manasseh’s reign. The *apophrycon* called “the Ascension of Isaiah”, which records the prophet’s death, is a composite work, Christian in its completed form; but the record of Isaiah’s martyrdom which it incorporates ( especially parts of Asc. Isa. 1:1-3:12; 5:1b-14 ) is of Jewish origin and exhibits affinities with the Qumran literature. It tells how Isaiah, to avoid the wickedness rampant in Jerusalem under Manasseh, left the capital for Bethlehem and then withdrew to the hill country. There he was seized and sawn in two with a wooden saw; before his death he commanded his

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudopigraphic Jewish Work – “The Martyrdom of Isaiah”, as well as passages in the Jewish Talmud writings

disciples to escape the persecution by going to Phoenicia, “because”, he said, “for me only has God mingled the cup” ( Asc. Isa. 5:13 ).”<sup>9</sup>

*“they were killed with the sword...” v. 37c*

Two prime examples of this in the OT are I KGS 19:10; Jer. 26:20-23; and Paul mentions the idea of being killed by the sword in his amazing chapter 8 of Romans – cf. 8:35-36, verse 6 quoting Psalm 44:22. The context here of course, is that the death of saints does not remove them from God’s hand ( JN 10:29-30 ). Blessed assurance!

*“They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated...” V. 37d*

In this case, this is such a common, general description of the OT saints who suffered the hatred of the world outside of Israel, as Israelites who trusted their God, and also suffered all sorts of indignities at the hands of their own people – the majority against the remnant. These were the remnant, who refused to deny God’s truth and endured despite the mocking and the ill treatment of their fellow Israelites all too often. This passage depicts, perhaps as one random example, the treatment of the faithful Hannah at the hands of Eli in I Sam. 1:6-20, who trusted God so much that she promised her firstborn son ( should God be gracious enough to give her a son ) to God and His service. Eli’s immediate response to her emotional and heartfelt prayer was indignant and demeaning.

Philip Hughes points out regarding this passage;

“It depicts, moreover, the fierce hatred of the unbelieving world in its guilty hostility to the truth as it ruthlessly hurts and assaults those whose trust is in the immutability of the Divine promises. Rejecting the world, they are ejected by the world. For their refusal to accept this world’s fallen standards, the world attempts to eliminate them and their witness. But it is precisely these hunted heroes of the faith whom ( as our author declares in a resounding parenthesis ), “the world was not worthy?.”<sup>10</sup>

## The World Was Not Worthy of Them

v. 38

This verse brings more specificity to what v. 37 has said about those afflicted and mistreated. This verse would include almost all the OT prophets, but especially Elijah & Elisha ( I KGD 19:4; 2 KGS 2:8 ). The godly ones often had to resort to hiding in caves to escape evil people who preferred them to be silenced by death. In I KGS 18:4,13, many prophets were hidden from King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel; and David often hid in caves ( I Sam. 22:1 for example ) to escape Saul’s murderous jealousy.

<sup>9</sup> FF Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans / revised 1990, NICNT Commentary, p. 328

<sup>10</sup> Philip Hughes, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 515

Tom Schreiner says,

“The people of God have always been a minority people, a pilgrim people and often despised and forsaken.”<sup>11</sup>

Such people in the OT , and in our own times, in our own country, the US, in 3<sup>rd</sup> world nations, in the European Union, in communist countries, and everywhere there are believers, who, as those who fix their gaze on a better world, they endure and by their faith they overcome, knowing that, as they do ( and as the world refuses to know ) that “the world passes away”, but that, “he who does the will of God abides forever ( I JN 2:17; 5:4 ).”<sup>12</sup>

God’s estimate of those who love, worship, cherish and trust Him is far different from how the world thinks of true believers and is evidenced by numerous verses, of which a couple are: Ps. 16:3, and 16:11.

Christ, as He comforts His disciples in John 13-16, points this distinction out, regarding the world’s estimate of the worth of Christians and His Father’s estimate of them – Note JN 15:18-25; 16:1-4; and regard Paul’s statement of faith in II Tim. 3:10-17 ( esp. v. 12 ).

Richard Philips points this out about the list of names in Hebrews 11;

“What is it, then, that puts their names on this blessed list of God’s beloved? It is only one thing: faith. Someday we will look back and see how insignificant are so many things we think so important now – our clothes, our cars, our houses, our reputations – just as we look back on the heroes of Hebrews 11 and realize that their faith is all that really mattered. With faith we gain Christ and His cross, the forgiveness of sin and life everlasting; without faith we are left to perish with the useless things of the world.”<sup>13</sup>

## They Died Without Receiving What was Promised vv. 39-40

Notice 11:1-2, because here, so many verses later, is a comment that returns to that theme. All these people we have been studying for a number of months now, did not cease believing, although the promises were not fulfilled in any complete way. Oh, some received distinct promises along the way, like Sarah in 11:11, and those depicted in 11:33ff, but the main promises, the final inheritance, that city they sought ( 11:16 ), are eschatological promises -an eternal inheritance and a final abiding Sabbath rest ( Heb. 4:11 ). It is a coming to earth of God’s Kingdom, a final step of glorification in our salvation, and a life of abiding presence with Christ and our heavenly Father, when all is said and done ( cf. JN 17:24 ).

In v. 40, God ordained that the order of all things would follow the paths He laid down in the Council of the Godhead ( Eph. 1:11 ) before time began, in what we refer to as

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<sup>11</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 373

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, p. 515

<sup>13</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 526



'history'. Despite the remarkable faith exhibited and celebrated in chapter 11, something "better" would only come as the New Covenant was unveiled and inaugurated by Christ. This was inaugurated (but not fulfilled – see Lesson # 21 ) by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now that He has come as promised, and accomplished all He was sent to accomplish ( cf. JN 17:4 ), and those who trust in Him have, even in this life, up to now, experienced something better. It has always – everything that is – been pointing inexorably to Christ. That's the theme of Hebrews, His superiority in whatever aspect of religious doctrines or people you could name!

Richard Phillips summarizes this well;

"These men and women of faith died without receiving all that had been promised. Verse 40 concludes: "God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." The key word is "better". It is a key to the whole book of Hebrews, which speaks of better things in Christ – a better plan, a better priest, a better covenant, a better sacrifice, a better home forever. These heroes of faith were waiting to see all these things that are better – things that can only be seen through faith in Jesus Christ. If these OT saints could believe not seeing Christ – knowing only shadows and not the reality – not seeing with anything like our clarity the purchase price of our redemption by the cross – then how much more faith ought we to have than they, we who are called by his very name? Calvin writes, "A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?" Far from concluding from this great chapter that our circumstances make a smaller demand for faith, this argues that our greater privilege brings a greater responsibility. In light of the cross of Christ, this is how every believing heart must respond;

*When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died,*

*My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it Lord, that I should boast, save in the dearth of Christ my God:*

*All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood...*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;*

*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."*

*(Isaac Watts – "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross")<sup>14</sup>*

Then, a modern day martyr, the missionary Jim Elliot wrote these now famous words in his diary,

"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 526-527

<sup>15</sup> Cited by Richard Phillips, p. 526

I will close this lesson and this chapter of Hebrews with an appeal to the words of the martyred prophet, Isaiah – Isaiah 43:1-3a.

Bruce Ware makes a solid point as well,

“God’s presence with his people amid their affliction guarantees that nothing can befall them that has not been ‘screened’ by the wise, powerful and providential hand of [ a loving ] God.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small*, Crossway, 2003, pp. 81-82