

Hebrews 11:32-12:2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32 to chapter 12 verse 2. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect.

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, 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. The end of Hebrews chapter 11 and into Hebrews chapter 12 concludes the great list of the exemplars of the faith from the Old Covenant. The author of Hebrews began his catalogue with the story of creation itself, moved to Cain and Abel, to Noah, to the patriarchs, and all the way down through the history of the Old Testament.

While he could continue the tour through the Old Testament, he hastens us down, as it were, a long hallway, past many doors he might have shown us into, a number of them quite surprising.

Tracing the story through the judges and into the story of the kingdom and the prophets, he gives us a number of exemplars. Faith is seen in a host of different situations. It's seen in battle, in perseverance through suffering, in accepting opposition and alienation.

[2 : 21] One thing the reader will notice is a movement from battles and military struggles being paramount and foremost, to a focus upon persecution, suffering, and rejection, from the faith of judges and kings to the faith of the prophets and the sufferers, whose struggle was often a much lonelier one.

We should also recognize a number of the events being alluded to, from tradition and from scripture. The Shunammite woman, for instance, is a woman who received her dead son back. Jeremiah was stoned.

According to tradition, Isaiah was sawn in two. Others, like Elijah, wandered about in the wilderness. The world considered these people unworthy, but presented themselves as unworthy of these people of faith.

The test of hospitality is an important one within the New and the Old Testament. God tests people by sending a messenger or visitor to them unawares. Will they receive and welcome this person? Will they reject them and turn them away? Abraham and his reception of the angels in chapter 18 of Genesis is a great example of this. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew chapter 25 is a further example of this.

[3 : 30] People are judged on the basis of how they treat the messengers of God. And the prophets, these figures who are easy to reject, to ignore, or to marginalize, often serve to test God's people to see whether they will receive the word that he has sent to them.

These great exemplars of faith were not received. They were outsiders. They were marginalized. They were exiles. They wandered about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.

All these places where human beings do not dwell. In expelling them, the world did not consider them worthy, not knowing that in rejecting them, it was condemning itself. The author of Hebrews moves forward to give an example of a race before a vast audience, but not just mere spectators. It's described like a relay race of faith, with each generation passing things on to the generations succeeding them. There are persons that have completed their leg of the uncompleted race that are watching us run ours.

They exemplify what faithfulness looks like to us, and we look to Jesus who has blazed the trail ahead of everyone to the finish line. He has brought the entire race of faith to its glorious completion.

[4 : 39] The faithful heroes of this book are to look to these figures as their forerunners in the faith, yet ultimately aims with them of the promise of God. The forerunners did not receive that promise.

However, Christ's high priestly work has brought the promise of God into more concrete reality, and we now more directly receive benefits that they could only await. We have been perfected, made fit to enter into God's very presence, and they can now share in what we have received.

Following the great list of the heroes of the faith in chapter 11, chapter 12 then points us towards the one in whom the entire story of faith reaches its climax, Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

He is the one who not only runs the way of faith himself, but also trailblazes the way to its heavenly destination. He is both our example and our deliverer. He both leads the way and clears the way.

He opens our way to approach God here and now, but he is also the high priest who establishes our final and complete access to God's presence. The way of faithfulness is more perfectly exemplified in him, but he is also the one to whom our faith looks as its object.

[5 : 51] Without the salvation of Christ, faith would be in vain. The promise and the deliverance to which it looks would not be realized. In this respect, Christ is both like and unlike those who live by faith.

He faithfully obeys and perseveres through suffering, but while his people must depend upon his work by faith to have a way to God, he creates this way for them as the faithful son.

He does not need this way himself. Rather, he takes flesh and suffers so that he might furnish a way for others. This way is achieved through his facing of the shame of the cross and doing so in the light of the joy that was set before him.

In this respect, he also provides an example for us. We face the shame of persecution, resistance, rejection, the same sort of rejection that is described of the people of faith at the end of chapter 11. And we must do so, we must face these challenges in the light of what God has prepared for us. In the same way as Christ looked for that joy that was set before him, so we must look towards his heavenly joy, to sharing in his glorification.

[6 : 58] The charge here is similar to that of 2 Corinthians 4, verses 17-18. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. A question to consider, how does the work of Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith inform the way that we learn from other exemplars of faith that have preceded and that follow him?