

(Devotional #21) *Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40*
Heroes of the Faith: From the Conquest to the Early Monarchy
(PLEASE READ Hebrews 11:32-40)

What more can I say ... – Hebrews 11:32^a

With Rahab and the defeat of Jericho, the subjects of last week's devotional, the author of Hebrews has made his case regarding the parade of great heroes of the faith. But to show he could continue on with many other examples, he lists *Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets*. Then he mentions some of the mighty deeds of faith these performed: *conquering kingdoms, performing acts of righteousness, the realization of specific divine promises, victory over lions, fire, and sword. There are acts of supernatural strength, victories in war, the defeat of foreign armies, accounts of actual resurrections, and so on.*

Our text mentions six men by name, whose lives span the years between the conquest of Canaan and the early monarchy. You may have noticed, these six are not listed in Hebrews in chronological order. In fact, if we list them in pairs, each pair is cited in reverse chronological order:

AS LISTED IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS:

Gideon – Barak
Samson – Jephthah
David – Samuel

ACTUAL CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER IN THE BIBLE:

Barak – Gideon
Jephthah – Samson
Samuel – David

I believe the author of Hebrews did this purposefully to associate Samuel more closely with the prophets, which he mentions next. Indeed, Samuel was prophet (formerly called a 'SEER'¹ – רוֹאֵה – pronounced, ro'eh), the first in a successive line of Hebrew prophets. (*You may recall from last week, he did this same thing with the order of Jericho and Rahab.*) As interpreters of Scripture, we must be willing to give the New Testament authors leeway to make literary decisions without presuming a lack of knowledge on their part of the actual history of Israel.

Four of those mentioned (*Gideon², Barak, Samson, and Jephthah*), are from the era of the Judges, one is a transitional character (*Samuel*) while only one king is mentioned by name (*David*). Does it surprise you that the heroes of faith listed here lived in a time in Israel's history when it is said, "*everyone did what was right in his own eyes³*"? The era of the Judges was a dark time for Israel, *yet it was during this time⁴ that these men and women were said to have, "lived by faith."* Even when the culture disdained the Word of God, there were believers, who lived faithfully and honored God with their lives. We are living in such times today ... and our calling to live according the Word of God is no less important now than it was in ancient Israel.

There is a tendency to elevate to elite status, those listed in Scripture as faithful servants of God. But perhaps they were not that different from us! Gideon was hiding in a wine press when God called him to lead the army against the mighty Midianites. David was a teenager tending sheep when he picked up five smooth stones and slew Goliath. Samson was strong in body, but he was emotionally weak. If each of these could live by faith, then so can we. Remember, we have more written revelation than they had; but in addition to the written Word of God, we have the

¹ See 1 Samuel 9:9, an editorial note inserted into the text of 1 Samuel.

² Gideon is the same person as Jerubba'al, mentioned in 1 Samuel 12:11; note especially Judges 7:1. The name, 'Jerubba'al' means, 'Ba'al Fighter.'

³ See Judges 21:25

⁴ To quote from LORD OF THE RINGS, "We do not choose the times, we only choose how we respond to the times."

Living Word of God, Jesus Christ. We are without excuse, when we fail to follow the precepts laid out for us both in the Bible and by the example of the life of Christ Himself.

Gideon:

Gideon was Israel's champion in the battle with the Midianites, detailed in Judges 7. He commanded an army of 32,000, which God whittled down to 300 men. The reason for this profound reduction is given in a key-verse: Judges 7:2: ***“The people who are with you are too many for me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel will become boastful, saying, my own power has delivered me.”*** Gideon's faith was demonstrated when God asked him to do something that was humanly impossible ... defeat the mighty army of Midian⁵ with a handful of average soldiers.

The lesson of Gideon's faith is this: ***WHEN GOD ASKS THE IMPOSSIBLE, TRUST HIM ANYWAY.*** We may be fearful, but fear is not disobedience, and faithful obedience is a righteous act. Sufficiency always lies with God, not with man⁶. This was the message of the Angel Gabriel to Mary in Luke 1:37. When she could not grasp how a virgin could bear a child, the angel said: ***“Nothing is impossible with God.”*** This was the same message the angel gave Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:14, when they doubted Sarah could bear a child in her old age: ***“Is anything too difficult for the LORD”?***

Samson:

To include Samson⁷ as a man of faith may seem odd, since he spent much of his life in rebellion – yet Samson's is the only birth narrative recorded in the Book of Judges⁸. We know from an early age, the LORD blessed Samson, and as he grew, the Spirit of the LORD began to direct his decisions, even the decisions that are disheartening to the reader. His miraculous birth raises our expectations, but his actions as a young man, disappoint.

Samson should have led the Israelites in battle against the Philistines, but instead, he fell for a girl from Timnah, a Philistine city. His parents asked the right question, ***‘why can't you find a nice Jewish girl to marry’?*** But they did not exert enough ***‘parental guidance’*** to dissuade him from becoming engaged to a girl from among the enemies of Israel.

Samson fell victim to one of the three named categories of sin: ***“For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but from the world” – 1 John 2:16.*** Everything about the girl from Timnah had to do with Samson's eyes¹⁰. ***“Samson SAW a young Philistine woman” (Judges 14:1).*** He told his parents, ***“I have SEEN a young Philistine woman” (Judges 14:2).*** And finally, ***“she is right in my EYES” (Judges 14:3^b).***

⁵ Judges 6:5 describes the Midianite Army as being ‘like locusts.’ In Judges 7:12 the number of their camels are said to be ‘without number, like the sand,’ and in Judges 8:10 the size of the opposing army is said to be 135,000.

⁶ Recall Christ's statement regarding human weakness, and Paul's response to it in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness ... Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”***

⁷ The story of Samson is recorded in Judges Chapters 13–16.

⁸ See Judges 13:24-25. Samson's name comes from the Hebrew word for ‘SUN’ and probably means something like, ‘SUNLIGHT.’

⁹ My paraphrase of Judges 14:3^a

¹⁰ Do not miss the allusion here to Judges 21:25: ***“In those days (i.e., during the Period of the Judges) everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”***

¹¹ Though English translations differ, ***“she is right in my eyes”*** is a literal translation of the last phrase of the Hebrew text of Judges 14:4.

Judges 14:4 is instructive – the text reads, “**however, his father and his mother did not know it was of the LORD, for He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines.**” Don’t misread this verse! It was not Samson who was seeking an occasion against the Philistines, but the LORD. God may use human emotions, fears, and even disobedience, to accomplish His goals. In this case, He used Samson’s attraction to a Philistine girl to create an occasion to judge the enemies of Israel¹². And that is what happened. The sad commentary of Samson’s life is, “**so the dead that he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life**” – **Judges 16:30^b**.

David:

*When one rules justly over men,
ruling in the fear of God,
He dawns on them like the light of the morning,
like the sun shining forth on a morning without clouds,
like rain causing tender grass to spring forth from the earth,
Truly is not my house so with God?
For He has made an everlasting covenant with me,
orderly and secure – 2 Samuel 23:3^b-5 (the last words of David)*

David is the one of whom God said, “**I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will**”¹³ – **Acts 13:22**. What does “**a man after my heart**” mean? This is an easy question to answer because the answer appears in the next phrase: “**who will do all my will.**” A man after God’s heart is a man whose deepest desire is to love and obey the Lord. We know from David, this does **NOT** mean, ‘**a man who is perfect.**’ In that God could claim this about David, who in the lowest moments of his life had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then killed her husband, is a testimony ... *not to the goodness of man ... but to the infinite mercy of God*, made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross.

We learn more about David’s heart from the Book of Psalms than we do from the historical narratives. Of the 150-psalms in the Bible, David wrote over half of them. We know from these Davidic poems that he both delighted in and loved God’s Law¹⁴. And because he loved God’s statutes, he meditated upon them ... and as he did, God enlightened David to understand and appreciate the importance of obedience¹⁵. As a man after God’s heart, David was a man, who did not fail to give thanks¹⁶ to the Lord for the many blessings God bestowed on him. And he was a man of repentance. When David failed, he turned to God and said, “**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your covenant-love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin**”¹⁷. ”

Of course, David’s faith was demonstrated tangibly when as a young man, he faced Goliath and defeated the Philistine Champion¹⁸.

¹² Just as Joseph pointed out to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery, “**I AM IN GOD’S PLACE!** What you did to me you meant for evil (i.e., it was in fact evil), but God meant it for good, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” – *Genesis 50:19-20*.

¹³ See also *1 Samuel 13:14*

¹⁴ See *Psalm 119:47-48*

¹⁵ See *Psalm 119:1-3*

¹⁶ See *Psalm 26:6-7*

¹⁷ See *Psalm 51:1-2*

¹⁸ See *1 Samuel 17:37*

Acts of Faith Recounted:

After citing these examples of faithful men, Hebrews 11 turns to actual acts of faith without naming the men and women who performed the acts. We will cite just a few of these instances:

- **Conquered kingdoms:** there are more than one example, but the beginning of Israel's military victories began with the defeat of the Amorites¹⁹ (*the kings Og and Sihon*).
- **Stopped the mouths of lions:** Quite obviously this is an allusion to Daniel and the den of lions, recorded in Daniel 6:1-28.
- **Quenched the power of fire:** Again, a reference to a miracle recorded in Daniel 3:1-30. This is a reference to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego and the fiery furnace.
- **Acts of supernatural strength:** The obvious example is Samson, but we should not focus only on him, or even, only on men. Clement of Rome pointed out correctly that many women were '*made strong*²⁰' and accomplished many deeds of valor. Among these he cites Esther.

The list of accomplishments in Hebrews 11:33-35^a give the impression that faith always prevails in the life of believers. We may hear teachers say, "*if we live by faith, miracles will happen.*" But take note of the word '*others*' in verse 35. '*Others were tortured, mocked, whipped, placed in chains, imprisoned, treated brutally, subjected to illnesses, homelessness, and hunger ...* these are not the results we associate with faith ... for isn't '*faith*' supposed to deliver us from such things? From an unbeliever's standpoint, these might be considered '*losses*,' but from God's perspective, they are evidence of '*faith approved*' – (*cf. verse 39*).

Because these believers lived by faith, despite the harsh realities of their experiences, they gained a good report and were commended by God. They believed God and acted on the assurance and conviction that what God promised, He would do, even if God's actions were yet future. God gave them a good report, not because they were successful, but because they were faithful in the midst of difficulties.

We have not attempted to address every detail mentioned in this parade of the heroes of faith, to which these closing verses of Hebrews Chapter 11 allude, nor have we commented on every instance of valor. It is not necessary to do so, for the point is made that sacred history is replete with examples of faithful men and women.

As amazing as these examples of faith are, the greatest thing of all is – the list doesn't end with the monarchy; we also have a part to play in the parade. We are among a long line of believers, whose names are written in God's Book of Life. Our names may not be along-side theirs in the Bible, but we are heirs of the same blessings. While the heroes of faith in the Book of Hebrews looked forward to the completed work of Christ, we look back at His **FINISHED** work. So, in some way, when we come to faith in Christ, it validates their forward-looking faith.

We are called to run the same race they ran – **THE RACE OF FAITH** – and this race is not a 100-yard dash ... it is a marathon. We are called to judge the present by the future, and to weigh the permanent against the temporary – over the full course of our lives. The whole argument of the chapter reaches its climax, not in verse 40, but in Hebrews 12:1-3. Because they did it, we are called to do it after them. Because they lived by faith we are called to live by faith. We are called to run the race with endurance.

¹⁹ See Numbers 21:21-35

²⁰ See 1 Clement 55:3