

Faithful Conquerors

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, January 27, 2002
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

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Hebrews 11:29-39

By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days. 31 By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace. 32 And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: 33 Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. 35 Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: 36 And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: 37 They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; 38 (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. 39 And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise.

If ever my hand has been used by the Chief Shepherd to heal His wounded and broken-hearted, I pray it is this morning. I know that some of you are not only suffering, but your load is compounded by the mystery of why you're suffering. I have thought the same as you when I have endured adversity. I believed that if I simply knew His reasons for allowing suffering into my life, that I could bear the hurt so much better. But often He chooses not to tell us why, but rather He bids us to follow Him through the long and dark valley of misery and mystery and trust Him.

God is a mystery. You really cannot explain God. Can you tell me why He does what He does? Can you tell us the reasons behind His actions and His judgments? Hardly. In fact, I think the Apostle Paul said it so well, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" Who am I but a measly old worm trying to ascertain and comprehend my Maker? Surely the finite cannot contain the infinite. The Bible does not even attempt to explain God in His fullness. That's not the job of the Bible. It merely gives us enough revelation of His person and work in the realm of time that we can know Him personally, and that's all.

We all want to put God in a manageable box, but such can't be done. No system of theology adequately explains God. In fact, if it did I wouldn't want a part of it. When man's theology takes the mystery out of God, then man has simply invented a God after his own elaborate systems. For myself, I make no apologies about it; I am one who believes in a system called the "Doctrines of Grace." Some have labeled it "Calvinism." But I know, and I'm quite comfortable, that my Calvinism does not explain God. It doesn't even come close. All it tells me is how God is working salvifically in redeeming men unto Himself. There is no system of theology that will explain God. And if you have one that does, it's no good, it's not Biblical.

There are paradoxes in God's character. What is a paradox? A paradox looks like a contradiction, but it really isn't. It is these paradoxes that we find in the Bible that make me know that the Bible is not authored by man. If man had written the Scriptures and they came from the heart and mind of a man, then man would have dotted every "i" and crossed every "t" and you would have a perfect, explainable, and controllable God. But through the Scriptures God allows us to peek into the mystery of His person and lets us be awed and amazed by His incomprehensibility. Surely an infinite being cannot be comprehended by the finite. God cannot be fully known by you or me. The beauty of doctrine is simply to lead us to a breathtaking adoration of God and His greatness. But unfortunately, most of us don't want to be adoring, but rather adored for our knowledge of the divine and the infinite. We want people to look at us, and say, oh what a man of God, he knows so much about God, rather than to say, oh what a great God this man serves.

There are many baffling mysteries about God. For example, the Trinity; the eternal predestination of God; and His own eternality, having no beginning and no end. But perhaps the one mystery of God's providence that pains us the most is why does God deliver some of His children and does not deliver them all. Today, I believe our text will afford us a comfort, I pray, and a better understanding of our Lord's providence in our lives. We've heard a testimony already this morning that so well illustrates my message how in one family God providentially delivers one son of severe respiratory virus but up to now has not delivered another son from diabetes. Why does God do this? There are some who advocate that if you have enough faith you will be wise, well, and wealthy. They will look to a poor man or a sick man and say, "The problem is, sir, you do not have enough faith." Then there are others who would tell us that you should never expect God to do the miraculous, and you must simply learn to endure your pain and poverty. These are evidences that there's too much wrong information about God and faith today. Well, I hope you're going to find that both of these extremes are wrong. We will find that there's much more to this question than the patent answers that man has developed, and we shall find it in our text of Hebrews chapter eleven verses twenty-nine through thirty-nine.

For our consideration this morning I want first to show that God delivers by faith. God delivers miraculously. Look at verse twenty-nine.

By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned.

One miracle stands apart from all other miracles in the Bible, the crossing of the Red Sea. God took His people to a place where to their backs an Egyptian army was breathing down on them and before them was an impassible sea. It was there that the prophet and servant of God, Moses, lifted up the rod of God and the blast from God's nostrils parted the uncrossable sea, and there was a glorious crossing. The Egyptians who thought they too could do the same discovered quickly, and to their horror, that they could not because the God of Israel was not for them. God's breath was withdrawn and with that the walls of water came crashing down, drowning the entire Egyptian army. That's a miracle. That is a miracle!

In verse thirty, we see by faith the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days.

Can you imagine, no wrecking crew or ball to destroy. The walled city was destroyed by a simple march around the walls for seven days, and on the seventh day the march lasted seven laps around the city's perimeter and on the seventh lap there was a shout to God. Trumpets were blaring and the voice of praise was so loud, so reverberating, that the walls of Jericho shook until they "came tumbling down." That's a miracle.

In verse thirty-three we read of how the mouth of lions were stopped.

Daniel. Who through faith . . . stopped the mouths of lions

I'm sure this is referring to Daniel, "stopped the mouths of lions." What a miraculous deliverance. Framed by those evil conspirators, Daniel is thrust into a den of wild lions. But God sends an angel to close the beasts' mouths, and Daniel grabs one of them and he yanks him up for a pillow that night. That's a miracle. And God delivered Daniel miraculously by faith.

Verse thirty-five speaks of the old woman whose son had died. She had given room and board to the prophet Elijah. And the Bible says,

Women received their dead raised to life again . . .

The prophet lay upon the woman's son, and the young man's life came back into his body. That's a miracle, and God by faith delivered miraculously.

But we find out that not only does God deliver by faith miraculously, but God delivers by faith providentially. Now the word "providence" is another one of those words we use, but perhaps we do not know its meaning. It is God's sovereign rule and watchful care over His creation. Sometimes, if not more often than not, the Lord does not work miraculously, but rather He orchestrates circumstances. In verse thirty-one we see that

By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.

In verse thirty-three we read of some of the great judges, Samson, Jephthae, and Barak,

Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises.

We read that men like David,

Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens (Hebrews 11:34).

God didn't do a miracle in these instances, but He delivered them nonetheless by providentially coming to their aid, and He changed their dire circumstances. I still believe in a God of the miraculous but I also believe in a God of the providential. I believe God controls all circumstances and He can orchestrate them for our deliverance. Why, there's no greater message of God's deliverance than Jesus Christ and the Cross. How do we dare to sit here today and doubt our God and His loving care of us when we think of the cross. In the cross is the demonstration of the greatest deliverer the world has ever seen.

He's my deliverer, He's your deliverer, He is that Lion of Judah that breaks every chain, and He is able and sufficient to deliver you. God is a deliverer. And in this passage, these saints faith moved in their lives in a miraculous or in a providential deliverance. I'm so glad that I can pray today and still believe God to do the miraculous or the providential. I'm still glad that God heals the sick. I'm glad that we serve a God who has not changed but who can change our circumstances.

But, secondly, our text tells us that by faith God does not deliver. Yes, you heard me right. I say by faith, not a lack of it, but by faith God does not deliver. Look at verse thirty-five,

Women received their dead raised to life again: and others...

This one verse is so full it could be one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament by which to encourage the discouraged. "Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured." The word "tortured" literally means "to be put to the rack." You know what the rack is, it was an apparatus of frightful and inhumane torture. One would be placed on this apparatus and the tormentors would crank it and stretch the victim's body until literally the joints would be separated.

...and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of [cruel] mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment (Hebrews 11:35b-36).

By faith they were ridiculed and scoffed and laughed at. Never are you more saintly than when you are enduring the reproach of Christ.

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder (Hebrews 11:37a).

I think this is a reference to Isaiah. Tradition tells us that Isaiah, under the wicked leadership of King Manasseh, was placed in a hollowed out log and was sawed in two. Are you going to say that Isaiah died because he had a lack of faith? No sir, he died by faith.

Some were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented (Hebrews 11:37b).

Oh I wish some of our “prosperity” preachers would honestly read this text. I think it’s an appalling arrogance that preachers will stand up and look into the camera and say, “If you would only have more faith, you would not be destitute, you would not be broke, you would not be afflicted, and you would not be tormented.” Verse thirty-eight speaks of these, whom today’s faith preachers contradict,

(Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Make no mistake about it, the Bible is telling us that faith is used by God to cause the saint to endure affliction as well as to be delivered from affliction. Verse thirty-nine,

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise.

“And these all . . .” Who’s the all? All is everyone that the writer has been talking about from Abel until the women receiving their dead to life again, but not just them, but all the “others.” It refers to all of the people listed throughout the whole chapter. It is these all “having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise.” Dear friend, the Bible tells me that God chose to deliver some of His saints and others He chose not to deliver. Why? That’s the question. May I suggest four reasons from this passage why God sometimes chooses not to deliver you?

First, sometimes God chooses not to deliver us and to allow suffering, pain, and adversity to come into our lives to display the truth which we profess. One of the remarkable stories of the early church’s persecution is the number of conversions that resulted from witnessing the deaths of God’s early martyrs. The Roman Coliseum was known as a place of blood where people’s entertainment and desire was so wicked that they found their pasttime to be the slaughtering of human lives. They would take Christians and wrap their bodies in animal skins and then turn hungry lions, tigers, and panthers upon these people, who would be torn apart by the wild beasts. It was a place where defenseless women and men were thrown into the arena against trained gladiators. They took men and women tied their hands to stakes, set them upon piles of kindling and wood, and set them on fire. Their bodies became flaming lights of faith, and it got hold of

people's hearts. There's something about a believer being willing to suffer and not recant in the face of adversity that tells people that this thing called Christianity may be real after all. Countless thousands have been ushered into the kingdom of God when they saw somebody willing to die for what they believed. In fact, one of the earliest and first martyrs got hold of a young man's life called Saul of Tarsus. When Saul watched Stephen pray, "Lord lay not this sin to their charge," and then die, that statement was like a goad in his soul that pricked his heart and would not let him go. On a Damascus road God showed up and brought conviction to its fulfillment and saved Saul. But remember it was in Stephen's death that he saw the glory of the truth of God in Jesus Christ.

I think second, dear friend, God sometimes allows you to suffer and not be delivered to encourage the faith of weaker Christians. These saints here from verses thirty-five through thirty-eight were an example for these Hebrews. Have we forgotten what the story of Hebrews is really all about? The book was written to encourage discouraged Christians. The Hebrews were undergoing persecution for what they believed. Many had been imprisoned. Some had lost their properties, and homes, and incomes because they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, the writer of Hebrews reminds them, that there had been others before them who also had been afflicted and suffered, and that they suffered by faith.

It's not necessarily because you lack faith that you suffer. It's because you do have faith that God is allowing you to suffer. Now we do not live in a culture where Christians are physically persecuted, although it does happen. It happens more than we think, but society's total assault on Christianity hasn't happened yet. But that fact does not rule out suffering for the sake of Christ. Suffering comes into our lives in many other ways. Often suffering comes by the hand of God. God allows some saints to suffer in order to help weaker Christians to be strong when they suffer. How much has my faith been encouraged to hear these testimonies today. And how much of an encouragement it is when you hear some other dear saint of God say, you know I don't understand why I'm enduring what I'm enduring, but I know He's with me and that's all that matters. That encourages me, that strengthens me. Dear friend, you may be right now God's example for someone. Keep the faith. Don't give up and don't think it is because of a lack of faith that you suffer.

Third, I believe God chooses not to deliver so that we may have a better understanding of what Christ suffered for us. I believe God allows suffering into the life of a believer to let the believer know to some degree how much Jesus suffered for you. I apologize because I'm using a personal testimony and this is not really bad compared to many of you who are physically suffering this morning, but it's all that I can tell you about. Almost two years ago, I suffered from bronchitis. I had never been so sick that I can remember in my life except when I think I was in ninth grade and they thought I was going to die. My temperature had spiked to over one hundred and five degrees and stayed that way for several days. But the thought came to me, as bad as I felt—my Master felt much worse. When I sprained my ankle so severely, I thought, oh what excruciating pain! But, oh, how much worse our Savior endured, yet for our sakes He received that and a whole lot more.

And then last, I believe the Lord allows us sometimes to suffer to give us a better understanding of the certainty of hell. If God who loves His people permits them to endure such suffering, what must we understand of the torments which God will inflict upon those whom He hates? If God allows His children whom He loves supremely to suffer, what kind of suffering must hell be for those whom God will reject. Dear sinner, please listen to me, think for a moment. I'm begging for your eternity here. You look to some of these people in this room who you know are suffering today and you think about this, God loves them, they're His children. Instead of thinking, "Well, if He's such a God of love and He cares, why is He allowing that to happen?" you look at that and thank God He's given you a lesson today. If He loves His children and allows them to suffer, then you cannot even imagine the suffering that awaits you if you don't repent and trust Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Now where do I get all of this, where do I get these four things? From verse thirty-eight, "Of whom the world was not worthy." Suffering saint, whether you're suffering because of persecution and your faith, or you're just suffering one of life's many troubles, God has taken your life and has given it to the world as a gift of grace. "Of whom the world was not worthy." That means that God gave these believers to the world as an example of what faith can do in the life of a believer. And if the world's not worthy of it and God gives it, that's grace, it is His undeserved kindness. Your suffering is hard. It pains us to watch people that we love so much suffer, but God says this world is not worthy of you and God is being gracious to this world by demonstrating that faith will not only change the circumstances, but it can also cause you to endure the circumstances.

The decision about deliverance is not made by faith. Whether God is going to deliver you miraculously or providentially or allow you to endure is not made by how much faith you have, although that is what we're told by the prosperity preachers and teachers. They say if you have more faith you could have more victory. But that's not determined by how much faith you have. The decision about deliverance is not made by faith but by God. God makes the decision.

Let me give you an illustration. The Acts of the Apostles chapter twelve verses one through three, the Bible tells us that Herod the king stretched forth his hand and he persecuted, he vexed the church. He took James, the brother of John, and killed him by the sword. When he saw how delighted the Jews were in this, he then arrested Peter and put him in prison to do the same thing, kill him by the sword. But God sent an angel and delivered Peter. Did James have any lack of faith or any less faith than Peter? No. God allowed James to die; He delivered Peter miraculously. How was the decision made? Well, it wasn't made by either one of those men, it was made by God. Listen, the events of our lives as Christians are not based upon how great or how weak your faith is. Your life is, as we've seen demonstrated by the testimonies today, in the sovereign hand of God. And if God so wills us to suffer, you can trust His wisdom. The same faith that escapes suffering is the same faith that endures suffering. Am I telling you to quit praying for deliverance? Absolutely not, not a bit! But I am here to tell you that while you are suffering you need to keep your eyes on Jesus. You must keep looking to Jesus because in suffering comes temptation. The temptation is to cease looking to Christ and put your focus on yourself, your pain, your circumstances. When you're hurting it's hard to look beyond the pain, it's hard to look beyond yourself. All of

your attention becomes inward. And so what do we say when we're suffering and our focus is on ourselves? If I only had done this or that; if I was more devout, if I prayed more, if I was a better witness, if I had more faith, etc. Friend, the key to faith and enduring suffering, or being delivered from suffering is not you, it's Christ. He is the author and the finisher of our faith. "Consider Jesus." Look at Him and see His suffering on your behalf. Do you think He suffered because He lacked faith? By faith He endured the Cross and the suffering, and by faith you can endure until God delivers or takes you home. That's what this text is all about. Some were delivered and they were delivered by faith. Some were not delivered and they were not delivered by faith. And it was the decision of God, not them. God is controlling your life if you're His, and you can trust Him, you can trust Him. Amen.