

The Eyes of Faith

August 18, 2019 - PT

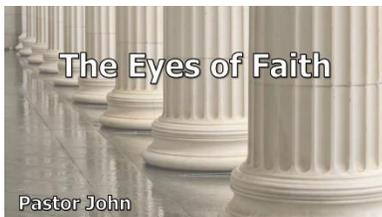
Scripture 1: Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. ³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect... ¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Scripture 2: Luke 12: 49-56

⁴⁹ "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

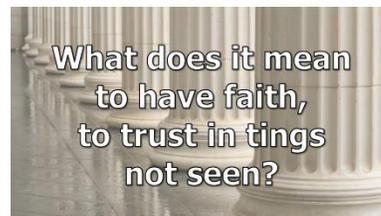
⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"



Today we tackle two texts that are admittedly a bit frightening or, at the minimum, challenging. Yes, as we read the continuation of the Hall of Fame list, there is much encouragement in the lives of these pillars of faith. But we also read in Hebrews 11 that our journey of faith is not all roses. There are dark valleys that we must walk through. At the end of the Hebrews passage, the writer calls us to look to Jesus, the perfecter of our faith. As we turn to our second passage, from Luke 12, we hear Jesus saying that he came to bring fire and division. This second passage closes with a condemnation of the crowd for not being able to

understand the things of God. Taken together these passages will help us to have better eyes of faith. Let us pray...

As we begin week two of our "Pillars of Faith" sermon series, here again is the key question for the series:

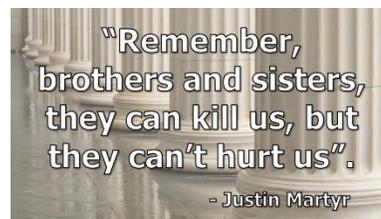


What does it mean to have faith, to trust in things not seen? Last week, when we touched on the stories of Abel and Enoch and Noah, of Abraham and Sarah, and of Isaac and Jacob, we saw how belief and action led to "approval" by God. In this week's passage the writer of Hebrews continues the list, citing the crossing of the Red Sea and the conquest of Jericho as two examples when the people's faith led to God's faithful response. Next comes a list: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets followed by a list of their heroic actions – conquering kingdoms, quenching fires, finding strength in weakness, putting foreign armies to flight. Great stories of victory won through trust in God. It is rousing stuff. In our walk of faith, we may not slay giants or put the enemy to flight, but we do find God's strength in our weakness and we do experience the Holy Spirit quenching the temptations that we face. We too have known God's faithful response in our lives.



And then we turn to verses 35 through 38 from Hebrews 11. Take a look there in your Bibles. It is quite a reality check. We read here that others were tortured, mocked, flogged, imprisoned, stoned to death, sawed in two. Others were destitute, persecuted, tormented, wandered in deserts and mountains, hid in caves and holes in the ground. If that was all there was to a life of faith, then it

is not exactly what anyone would want to sign up for. Yet, in spite of trial and hardship, these saints remained faithful and true to their faith. Each was commended by God for their faith. The writer of Hebrews, in verse 38, exalts them, saying, *"the world was not worthy"* of saints such as these. Like those we covered last week, these pillars of faith were commended because they were all looking forward to God's promises. The practice of looking forward has always been an element of the church. In the early church, Christians looked forward to and clung to God's promise that was fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection. In the second century, for Christians in Rome, persecution and threat of death were their daily realities. When early church leader Justin Martyr and his congregation chose death over offering sacrifices to the Roman gods, he spoke these words of encouragement, words that echo the faith of those in Hebrews 11 and the faith that sustained those in the early church:



"Remember, brothers and sisters, they can kill us, but they can't hurt us". This devotion to God is the kind of devotion we too should display in our faith.

At the end of chapter 11, there in verse 40, we find the tie that connects those in the hall of fame to the readers of Hebrews and on to us today as followers of Jesus Christ. In verse 39 we read that these saints were commended but did not receive what was promised. Here, the author is connecting the Old Testament promises that we talked about last week – divine favor, an inheritance, a promised blessing - with the New Testament promise of salvation through faith in Christ alone. In verse 40 we read that *"God had provided something better"*.



When speaking of something better, something that makes us perfect, the writer is referring here to the new covenant, established through Jesus, that is the hope of our faith today. The new covenant promises both victory over sin and over death. Through new covenant eyes we believe that one day we will be made new again, perfect, without pain or blemish or sin.

As we continue into chapter twelve, we learn that all of these in the Hall of Fame are part of the *"great cloud of witness"* that surrounds us as we live out our faith. Through their faith testimony they encourage us as we work out our own journey of faith. Like these pillars of faith did before us, we too are encouraged in verse one to *"lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us"*. We are encouraged to cast the cares of the world aside and to let go of the sin that seems to cling to us. We are called to persevere – a great word that implies that the walk of faith is not easy but takes a great effort. I believe that we are able to persevere because a life of faith is what God has planned for us and for all people. We are able to persevere only when we look first to Jesus, the *"pioneer and perfecter of our faith"*. Jesus is our role model, our example to follow, our something better. We are to look to Jesus, the fulfillment of the new covenant.



As we transition to Luke 12, it is this same Jesus that we are to look to as we seek to persevere in our faith that is warning the crowd that the times to come will not be peaceful or easy. In this sense, Jesus is echoing the difficult part that we read about in Hebrews and just talked about in Hebrews 12.

In Luke 12, in verses 49 and 50, we hear Jesus proclaiming that he has come to bring fire and division, not peace. Here Jesus is speaking of his ultimate purpose – not the cross or grave but to come again one day in final victory to judge the earth and to establish the new heaven and earth. If you have read Revelation, you know what Jesus is talking about here. The Great Tribulation will be a time of great distress and war and violence and death. But thanks be to God, it will also be a time of great conversion as many come to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus' victory over sin and death was just one of the first steps in what he came to accomplish.

In verses 52 and 53, we get a glimpse into what that fire, into what that division, will cause. Households, family members even, will be divided against each other. Some will claim Christ as Lord and Savior and others will deny him. Some in a family will live faithfully all of their lives while others will turn to the ways and idols of the world. This will cause conflict and division within families. This division was already happening in Jesus' day, it continues today, and it will continue right up until the day Jesus returns. The decision of individuals to live within a personal relationship will override familial loyalties and family bonds. It was, is, and always will be an individual decision to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Many of us grew up in the faith of our parents. Yet at some point, we each had to make the personal decision to surrender self and to invite Jesus into our hearts and lives.

It is the Jews failure to make this decision that drives the rest of our passage from Luke 12. Jesus notes their wonderful ability to predict the weather based on their knowledge of the patterns they can observe. Clouds in the west mean rain as the storm systems cross the Mediterranean, picking up moisture to deposit once the fronts hit landfall. When the wind blows out of the south, after coming across the arid and hot desert landscape, it brings with it a scorching heat. Yes, they can read these signs and predict the weather, but they are struggling to see the spiritual signs that are present to them. They cannot see what is ahead of Jesus, what is ahead of themselves, or what is ahead for the nation of Israel. The Old Testament as well as Jesus' life, teachings, and miracles all point to him being the Redeemer that will bring salvation to the world. The Jews do not see the crisis that is coming upon them because, as a whole, they reject the one sent by God. Their eyes of faith are blind.

To Jesus and to Christians looking backwards two thousand years, this is all very clear. Jesus is undoubtedly the Savior of the world, the perfecter of our faith, the only one to follow. Yet the Jews are blind to it. The present time is the critical time for them to make an important decision. To choose Jesus, to side with Jesus, is to choose God, to side with God. To choose, to side with Jesus, can only happen when one sees through eyes of faith. As the writer of Hebrews attests, even those that are commended for their faith have not yet received what was promised, for it comes only when one surrenders to Jesus. When they stepped across that threshold, when they entered eternity and came face to face with Christ, as people of faith, they bowed in surrender, acknowledging Jesus as Lord and King.

Like the “great cloud of witnesses”, those who modeled faith in what was not yet seen, Jesus admonishes his followers to open their eyes of faith, to see and believe in the unseen things of the Spirit. It takes eyes of faith to see in Jesus’ teachings and miracles God’s redemptive work for humankind. For you and me, for all people of faith, it takes a deep and abiding trust in God to become actively involved in that redemptive work. To become engaged in witnessing to and serving as part of God’s rule and reign now, in this time and place, requires that we see the world through eyes of faith. To be a part of God’s inbreaking activity in the world, bringing Christ into the lives of the lost and broken, requires a sure trust in God and eyes of faith that are willing to step into the unknown, into that which we cannot see. Do you trust God enough to see with eyes of faith?

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. Trust comes with knowledge and experience. Which do you need more of currently to build your trust and faith in God?
- 2) Pray. In what situation or with whom do you need to have stronger “eyes of faith”, allowing you to see more like Jesus sees?
- 3) Serve. Where is there division in your life? How could serving that person or people help to reconcile that division?