

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN END TIME – SAINTS TRIUMPHANT

The Perfect Ending

Hebrews 11:32-40 (ESV)

³² And what more shall 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, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. ³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Hebrews chapter 11 is filled with references to believers and their faith in God, often called “The Heroes of Faith” chapter. This goes with the theme of the first verse in the chapter which says: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Faith isn’t what you’ve already seen and experienced but it confidently trusts and expects the promised future things will happen.

After already talking about our faith in creation, Abel’s faith, Enoch’s faith, Noah’s faith, Abraham’s faith and the faith of many others, the author of this letter to the Hebrew Christians finds that time would fail him to tell all the other stories of faith in the Bible. So, he lists names and events.

Some people by their faith in God did amazing things like conquering kingdoms, stopping the mouths of lions like Daniel did, quenched the fury of the flames like the three men in the fiery furnace, escaped the edge of the sword like the prophet Elisha and Jeremiah did, became mighty in war like Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David. Some through faith received loved ones who had died back to life - at least 7 resurrection stories I can think of. Others by their faith would not give up their trust in God, even while undergoing torture.

Others, though, because of their faith were chained up, imprisoned, mocked, tortured, flogged – a whipping that went beyond the sting and lacerations of the leather whip to a device that had attached on the ends of it bits of bone and metal meant to dig into the flesh, drag, and tear it with each lash. Others had people pick up big rocks and pummel them with them over and over until they died. It is said that Isaiah the prophet was sawn in half. Some were beheaded. Others were crucified. Many went around destitute, living with no other clothing than sheep and goat skins, having to call a cave or the desert home because they couldn’t live an undisturbed, peaceful life in a real house. For these people who lived by their faith in God, it did not seem like a blessed life.

Whether someone experienced amazing things or awful things as they lived out their faith in God, the author of this letter tells us that “all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised.” (verse 39) Was their faith in God futile? Was this a sad ending? Will I have a sad ending? Did my loved ones who died holding on to this same faith have a sad ending?

I invited you to write names of your heroes of faith who have passed away and put them up here on these boards. I think this is an amazing list and personally want to know the story behind all these names, about how their faith impacted you. Right now, though, I too have to admit that time would fail us to tell all these stories. I asked you to write these names up here because I wanted to get you thinking about how the lives of your heroes of faith turned out. Did they get what God had promised?

One of my heroes of faith is a man named Andy Jackson. Most of you here today have never met Andy, but you’ve been blessed by him because he is the one who designed and built our baptismal font, our altar, and our cross. He and his wife JoAnn were some of the first people to become members of our church back in the 1990s. When I got here in 2014, Andy called me up, introduced himself, told me that he loved everyone here at Light of the Valley but couldn’t make it often because of his health problems. He asked if I could visit him when I had time. And I did, just about every week. He would often say, “Pastor, don’t take this the wrong way, but I always feel better after you leave.” The truth is, I did too. He was a great personal blessing to me, encouraging me, praying for me, building me up, doing whatever he could do to bring Jesus to people – even if he couldn’t physically do what he used to do.

And for that great faith, what did Andy get? You could certainly observe his years of loneliness after JoAnn died, longing to be reunited. You could see that his COPD was so bad that he couldn't stand at the microwave for the length of time needed to heat up a meal. He was attached to oxygen 24-7. He died in a hospice bed.

It doesn't seem right, does it? A man who gave so much to God with rarely a complaint coming from his lips suffered through all these things in spite of his faith. Same for the unnamed heroes of faith in our Bible reading today who were poor, homeless, mocked, flogged, imprisoned, tortured, killed. Maybe you see the same with your heroes of faith you wrote down on these boards. "The world was not worthy" of them, especially after how this world treated them. (verse 38) Don't we think that they deserved something better, that they deserved happier moments, less suffering, because of their faith in God?

Instead of living on what our eyes have seen about the outcome of their lives, about all the suffering that they lived through, we live by faith, trusting in what we have not seen. God told us that he paid for their sins, our sins, on the cross, that he conquered death by his resurrection so that people are declared not guilty of their sins. He has told us that he delivers these people from this cruel world and has given them peace and rest with him right now in heaven. They have a home with God where they are no longer mocked or imprisoned or tortured, a home we haven't seen yet. God has given them something great.

But interestingly enough, that's not the end of their stories. "All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised." (verse 39) Something is lacking. What have they not received? "God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." (verse 40) There is one thing that these heroes of faith, our heroes of faith, have not yet received, the thing promised by God, something to make this the perfect ending of their story: the resurrection of the dead.

We say in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. God has promised that one day every body that has ever been committed to the ground, that has turned to dust in death, will be raised back to life, the soul will be reunited with the body to live forever. Believers look forward to that promise that their bodies will be completely restored on that day. Never again will they ache or hurt, cry or get tired. This resurrection glory is previewed by Jesus' own resurrection from the dead. He has already conquered death and has promised that on this Last Day when he judges the world and raises all the dead, death will be completely obliterated. Our lives, our stories, will continue in an existence where there is no more death.

But this something better has not yet come; we're still waiting for this, just like our heroes of faith are. It's like knowing that we have a party planned and everything is ready and you're just waiting for everyone on your guest list to arrive. Some are here already, but you know that more are coming. They RSVP'ed, and they won't stand you up. The party will reach its pinnacle once everyone is here. That's the something better that God has provided for us and our heroes of faith. This is the perfect ending to our story – a happily ever after for all the believers, all the saints, all the heroes of faith, who have gone before us and all who will come after us. And this perfect ending doesn't end. This big party with God with perfected people in perfected bodies lasts forever - never becoming dull, never reaching a lull. This is the happiest ending that we wait for by faith in God, that he will indeed come through on his promise to provide something better for us yet.

Even though we live by faith that God will absolutely provide that perfect party for all believers, all our heroes of faith, at the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day, we get to preview that perfect resurrection party this side of heaven. We get to see it whenever we gather as the Church, as the body of Christ, the people who share the same faith in Christ and same confident trust in what he will do for us. Think of being with these people forever but in a perfect existence with God. That's what he promises.

What's more is that we get another part of that preview by having these boards up at the front where we have placed the names of our heroes of faith. Not only will we get to see them again and spend the happiest ever after with them, but so will all the other believers here today. You'll get to share your heroes of faith with me and everyone else here. You'll get to meet Andy Jackson. I'll get to meet all the people you wrote down on these boards. And we will all get to meet all these other heroes of faith from Gideon to David and everyone else, not missing out on anyone. Time will never be lacking after the resurrection of the dead.

The story of our loved ones in Christ who have died, our heroes of faith, is not over. The happiest ending is yet to come for them and us. We will all be perfected. We will all be reunited. We will all live with perfect God and share in each other's perfect company forever. This is what we wait for by faith: trusting that God will provide this better thing, this happiest ending, for them and us all together. Amen.