

Faith's Final Triumph (Hebrews 11:39–40)

Well, I'm a little bit excited for the sermon today because, for the first time since we began the book of Hebrews, when I asked you to turn to a passage, chapter 11, verse 39, I can see on my Bible at least the end of the book of Hebrews. We are up here at the top of this. We have this road to run all the way through here. We get to the end, and this is the finish line down here where there's white. That's like the end zone. We cross that and we've scored at something at the end of Hebrews. So it's close, it's near. You can see the end from here. Of course, you can see the sun from here too and it's ninety-three million miles away. But at least you can take heart in that I can see the end of the book.

These verses, verses 39–40, are a summary of the faith chapter. It's not the concluding argument of what he's been saying about faith. That comes in chapter 12. But at the end of chapter 11, in verses 39–40, he says something that is true of all of the heroes of faith that we've looked at so far in chapter 11. And it kind of gives us an example to reflect a little bit on what we have learned and what we have seen. We've gone back and looked at the definition of faith at the beginning of the chapter. We have seen all of the various examples of faith laid out in chronological order from right after the fall of man in the beginning with Cain and Abel and Abel's faith, and then all the way through the flood and the time of Abraham and to the patriarchs, to the end and close of the Old Testament time. We've looked at all the various examples that he's given to us in depth, and then we looked at the triumphs of faith that belong to those who are God's people. Then we considered the tribulations and trials that the faithful endure at the end of that chapter. And now he's just sort of wrapping all of that up to describe what is true of all of the heroes of faith and what it is that is in many ways also true of us.

Then when we get into chapter 12—and not to get ahead of myself but to kind of give you a glimpse into how all of this sort of fits together—when we jump into chapter 12 next week, Lord willing, the author is not changing his subject. He's actually bringing a conclusion to what he has been saying about faith in chapter 11. Notice chapter 12, verse 1 begins with a *therefore*. This is the conclusion to his argument in one sense. He's going to draw our attention to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the supreme example of that endurance that he says back at the end of chapter 10 that we have need of. Those of us who go through the tribulations of faith and suffer through the afflictions and the reproaches and the seizure of our property and being reproached for the name of Christ, we have, he says at the end of chapter 10, great need for endurance. And then

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he gives all of these examples of people who endured those very things and yet persevered all the way to the very end and finished their race in faith.

And then in chapter 12, verses 1–3, the ultimate example of one who endured hostility from sinners for the joy that was set before Him—that is, the reward that is to come. We've been talking about the reproach of faith and the reward of faith. Well, Christ is the ultimate example of that. He's the ultimate example of one who endured reproach from sinners for the joy of the reward that is to come. That's chapter 12, verses 1–3.

And then the author is not switching gears when he starts talking about the discipline of God's people, those who belong to Him. Because we may get to the end of chapter 11 and we read through all these people who endured these physical afflictions. Well, in chapter 12, beginning in verse 4 and following, he talks about the discipline that belongs to us as sons. And lest we think that when we go through adversities and trials and tribulations that these things are wasted or that they are proof that we do not have faith, he said, “No, these are the very things that God uses to refine and to purge us of sin and to bring discipline into our lives.” And that's a good thing. So those adversities, rather than being an evidence that we have no faith, are actually an evidence that we belong to God because if we didn't have those things, we might begin to question whether or not we truly belong to Him and whether faith is really something that we even have in this life. If we don't have the reproach that belongs to faith, then we ought to be questioning ourselves whether or not we even have truly genuine faith.

And then there is in chapter 12 the fifth and final warning passage in the book of Hebrews and that's connected to faith as well. We might even say that these last two warning passages in the book of Hebrews, the one at the end of chapter 10 and the one at the end of chapter 12, sort of bracket his discussion of faith in chapter 11. See at the end of chapter 10 he talks about those who fall away in whom His soul has no pleasure. God says that of those who have no faith and shrink back to destruction. Then he goes on to talk about the nature of true saving and enduring faith, the persevering faith that keeps us all the way through tribulations and reproaches and gives us the reward at the end.

And then after applying that and giving us an example of that and answering objection to that in chapter 12, we get to that fifth and final warning passage in chapter 12. And the argument, the purpose of the author, is to say see this kind of faith that I talked about in chapter 11 that I said you needed to have back in chapter 10, that kind of faith, if you have that, then you are promised the eschatological blessings and not the

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eschatological judgments. That's chapter 12. Those who have that faith in chapter 11, they get the eschatological, the end-times, blessings and not the end-times judgments when God shakes everything—he quotes from the prophets. When God shakes everything, those who have that true faith will persevere all the way to the end. So that's how chapter 10, chapter 11, and chapter 12 all fit together. But that's something we'll have to cover next week when we introduce chapter 12.

We are now in verses 39–40. Here between these two warning passages right on the heels of all of these examples of faith, read again with me verses 39–40. “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised” (v. 39). These Old Testament saints awaited the arrival of God's promise. That's the first thing he tells us of these who have been faithful in chapter 11. And second, then they also will enjoy with us the fullness of its ultimate fulfillment. Verse 40: “Because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.” See, he's answering an objection that the reader might naturally raise at this point. And that is why is it that those in the Old Testament who had this faith didn't receive everything that was promised in their lifetime? That's the objection that he's handling here. God has a purpose in this delay. He has a purpose for it. And that's what the author is describing here.

So let's look first at verse 39. These Old Testament saints awaited the arrival of God's promise. “All these,” he says at the beginning of verse 39. This is the group of faithful from Abel in verse 4 all the way through to those even in the intertestamental period that he described had a fixed hope on the better resurrection. All of these heroes of faith that we have listed here, all of them gained approval through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised. So there's something that they gained. Notice that in verse 39. They gained an approval, but they did not receive what was promised. So they gained something and didn't gain something else. And the author's point is that their not gaining of something else is tied to our salvation and the grace that God is bringing to us, so that with us they would eventually be made perfect but not apart from us.

But what they gained was approval. What does it mean that they gained approval? You remember back in chapter 11, verse 2, he says, “For by it the men of old gained approval.” That is by faith. Verse 1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it [that is, by faith] the men of old gained approval” (vv. 1–2). And then he goes on to give this list of men and women of old who gained

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approval. It's the exact same word used at the end of chapter 11 as was used at the beginning of chapter 11. So that idea of gaining approval is kind of a bracket in the text in which all of these examples fit. The beginning, the men of old gained approval, here are the men of old who did that, and you get to the end—all of these, having gained approval, did not receive what was promised. So what does it mean that they gained approval?

The word, the phrase itself, almost suggests some meritorious work, doesn't it? You talk about somebody gaining approval through something that they do is kind of how the translation suggests itself to us. These men gained approval, as if faith were something inside of us that we muster up. We create this, we nurture it, we develop it, and then we offer it up to God. And in exchange for this work of the human soul, God bestows upon us His approval, that there's something about you and I that can be approved of by God, and that because of our faith, He approves us. So the very description here sort of suggests a meritorious work, that God approves of us only after we have mustered the faith. But the word *gained approval* there is a verb, *martyreo*, and it means to testify, to bear witness, or to speak well of. And you can hear the word *martyr* in that word because a martyr was one who would give testimony by their life and by their death. Eventually, that's what the word martyr came to mean. Not just one who would bear testimony but one who would bear the ultimate testimony by testifying even with their life and their death. The word means to be well spoken of or to have a good reputation.

It's used a few times in the New Testament:

Acts 6:3: "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation." That's the word, the very same word, "men of good reputation."

Acts 10:22 says of Cornelius that he was "a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation." That's the phrase, "well spoken of." One who has a good reputation or who is well spoken of.

The same is said of Timothy, that "he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra" (Acts 16:2).

Acts 22:12 says, "Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews."

First Timothy 5:10: put widows on the list only if they have a good reputation. That's the same word.

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Third John, verse 12: “Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.”

So it's to be well spoken of or to have a good reputation, that people speak well or approvingly of you. That's what the word means.

But now that raises the question, since these are people who have gained approval or somebody has spoken well of them, who is the one who speaks well of the person of faith? It's certainly not the world because the world mocks us and reproaches us. So whose approval have we received? Or who's speaking well of us, that we have received their approval? And the only answer to that is God. By faith God Himself approves of us. He commends us. With these men who are in Hebrews 11, it is by their inclusion into the Hebrews hall of faith, by God blessing them. God gave to Abraham a land and blessings and promises. That was a signal of God's approval. God saved Noah and his family. That was God testifying of the appropriateness of Noah's faith and that Noah was saved on the basis of that faith. God accepted Abel's sacrifice. That was God bearing testimony that Abel was accepted by Him.

Back at the beginning of chapter 11 in verse 2, it says that the men of old gained approval. And then listen to the way those first few men of old are described. You can look back there if you'd like, at verse 4. “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.” Who was the one who testified about Abel? It was God Himself. So when Abel by faith brought the sacrifice, God accepted that sacrifice and rejected Cain's sacrifice. And God's acceptance of that sacrifice that Abel had offered to Him was God's testimony that Abel's faith was legitimate and God's testimony that Abel was accepted by Him on the basis of faith and faith alone.

Verse 5: “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.” He obtained whose witness? God's witness. Not everybody gets to be taken up into Heaven and not suffer through death. But Enoch did. Why? That was God's testimony, God's declaration to all of mankind that Enoch had faith.

Verse 6: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” God's reward

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to the faithful is God approving of and granting testimony to them of His acceptance to them on the basis of that faith. The one who has faith believes that God is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. And when God gives the reward to the faithful, fulfills His promises to them, that is a demonstration of His approval to them.

This is the faith then that is the simple trust that believes God, trusts His word, accepts what He has said. And notice how different this phraseology is from what the world does to the believers. God approves of the believer. We gain God's approval by faith, or approval comes to us from God on the basis of faith and faith alone. And how different is that from the world and what they commend and what they approve of? The world approves of fame and reputation and influence, power, wealth, notoriety, intellect, achievement, ability, accomplishments, beauty, skill. Those are all the things that the world lauds and loves. And yet all of those things are foolishness in the eyes of God. And what God approves of is faith.

The world says God should accept me because of my accomplishments. God should love me because I am so lovable. God should approve of me because I am so approvable. I am spanky. I'm the best thing since sliced bread. And God ought to laud His blessings and joys and pleasures upon me just on the basis that I am who I am. And who wouldn't want me in their family? So of course God wants me in His family. So that is how the world thinks. The world expects that God should honor those things, and God is not at all impressed by those things because God is the one who gave those things to that person to begin with. So a worldlying may say, "Well, God should bless me and love me and approve of me because of my intellect, because of my reputation, because of my skill." And to that God would simply say, "I'm the one who gave you your intellect, your reputation, and your skill. You owe all of that to Me. You would not have that if it weren't for Me. So give Me something else that might be approvable. Give Me something else. Get some other merit." And mankind has none. That which pleases God the world regards as folly, as weakness, and as insignificance. And that which pleases the world, God regards as foolishness and useless and insignificant.

You can contrast here in verse 39 the world's approach to believers with God's approach to believers. God approves of us. He loves us. But the world heaps upon believers the mockery, the scourging, the scorn, the ridicule, the hatred. That's all that the world has for those who are faithful to God, to those who belong to Him by faith. And what does God say of them? These are men and women of whom the world is not worthy. See that, friends, that is God's testimony of His approval. To have Him say, "Well done, good

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and faithful servant,” that is the ultimate commendation when we stand in the presence of the Lord. But to have the Lord say to the world concerning us, “My people are the men and women of whom this world is not worthy,” that is God lavishing His approval upon His people, those who are of the faith and who have faith.

So faith then is of utmost value. It is of supreme value. You and I will look back—thousands of years from now, we will look back upon all of the reputation and fame and the popularity and the treasures of this world, and we will realize that the only thing here that was really of any lasting value to us was faith. And that is a gift from God. And to say that faith is that which justifies us, faith is that which makes us acceptable to God, faith is that which we express and which we experience and which causes us to endure, that is not to say in any way or to deny in any measure that that same justifying and sanctifying and securing faith is the gift of God which God gives to His elect people. See, we can talk about that which gives us God's approval. That is faith and faith alone. But that faith is not something that we muster up. It's not something inside of fallen man that you just have to find a way with the right music, the right style of preaching, the right church program to somehow spark and sort of fan those flames up into a faith. No, man in his sin is dead. We are dead in our trespasses and sins without hope, with darkened hearts, darkened minds, darkened eyes, unable to respond, dead in sin. We have no ability to conjure up any kind of faith or belief.

So how is it then, if we can't do that, that we are going to be made acceptable to God? It's only on the basis of faith, which Ephesians 2 says is the gift of God lest any man should boast. So can you and I even boast in our faith, that I had faith and this guy didn't, so this guy's perishing and I get eternal blessing, this guy will perish in the eschatological judgments and I get the eschatological blessings? What makes me to differ from him? Oh, nothing but my faith. I can't boast in that because that's a gift from God. Because dead men can't believe. God must breathe new life into the sinner so that the sinner can believe the gospel, open his eyes so that he can see the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ, and cause him to see Christ as precious so that he will turn from his sin. That's God's work as well. Repentance is a gift. God turns us from our sin, breathes new life into us, and gives us the faith by which we are made acceptable to Him. So it is all from God, first to last.

Now, you'll notice that this idea of receiving a promise, we talked about this a couple of times in Hebrews 11, that there are ways in which we receive promises and there are ways in which we do not receive promises. Remember, if you look up at verse 13, “all

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these”—that is, Abraham and the patriarchs—“died in faith, without receiving the promises.” And then if you look at verse 33, it says by faith they obtained promises. And now here in verse 39, they did not receive what was promised. So they didn't get it, but they got it, but they didn't get it. So what are we talking about with those three statements? The author is not contradicting himself. He's not forgetting what it is that he wrote earlier in the chapter. It all depends on what promises we're talking about because there are promises and then there's *the* promise. So some of the patriarchs received things in their own lifetime that they were promised, and some of them were promised things that have even to this moment not yet been fulfilled. See, we're promised a better resurrection. Have we received that yet? We have not received that, but we most certainly will receive that. But by faith now we wait for the better resurrection, which is a promise that is yet to come. So there are promises that we receive by faith in the here and now, in this life now, and then there are promises that we do not receive until we die—and even a long time possibly after we die that we receive those promises.

What is the promise to Abraham that he did not receive? The land. But what was the promise to Abraham that he did receive? A son. So some were promised things that they'd never received in their life, others were promised things that they did receive in their life, but all of them were given a promise, *the* promise. And I think that it's that promise that the author has in mind here in verse 40.

Let's look now at verse 40. The Old Testament saints will enjoy the fullness of this promise's fulfillment. Verse 40: “Because God had provided something better for us.” The *because* there indicates that he is describing here a purpose. There is a reason why those Old Testament saints did not receive what was promised in their life. It is “because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect” (v. 40). Now, I said there are promises in the Old Testament and there are promises in the New Testament, and then there is *the* promise. What is *the* promise that they did not receive? There's one singular promise that all the Old Testament saints looked forward to and anticipated that they did not receive in their lifetime. The reason being is because God wanted them and us to be made perfect together at the same time. And for that reason, so that they would not reach the goal before we get to the goal, they got delayed and they did not receive the promise.

Whatever it is that is promised—I'm going to tell you what it is here in just a moment—is described here as the better. God had provided something better for us. What is the

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better in the book of Hebrews? I'll give you a hint. He's a better priest who occupies a better priesthood, who has offered a better sacrifice and shed a better blood so that He might initiate a better covenant and then give to us a better intercession so that He might grant to us better promises. There's one individual who is the better thing all the way through the book of Hebrews, and He, by His ministry and by His sacrifice, brings to His people that which is the better. So God did not give them the fulfillment of the promises in their lifetime because He had something better for us. And that better is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the promise that all the Old Testament looked forward to and anticipated.

So in Genesis 3, He is the seed of the woman who would come and crush the serpent's head. In Genesis 15, He's the seed of Abraham through whom all the nations would be blessed. He is the prophet like Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. He is the Servant promised to Isaiah who would come and do everything that Israel failed to do and fulfill all of the will of the Father. He is the rock who would give living water to His people, the bread of life who would fulfill the picture of the heavenly manna. He's the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, the seed of the woman, the virgin's offspring, the branch, the true vine, the good Shepherd, all of those Old Testament images, all of those Old Testament pictures. He's the King who would rule the nations, of whom David was just a glimpse. And He is the resurrection and the life who gives to us the better resurrection. It's the Lord Jesus Christ. All the Old Testament shadows pointed to Him. All the Old Testament hopes are realized in Him. All the promises are fulfilled in Him. He is the thing that is better.

So why is it that they did not receive everything that was promised in their lifetime? Because God has a much longer perspective on fulfilling His promises than we do, and He delayed in giving them everything so that the Messiah would come, and now we have received the benefit and the blessing of that revelation in Him. And because God has delayed the fulfillment of His promises, guess what? All of us who are sitting here, who are in Jesus Christ, have now been brought into the salvific blessings in Jesus Christ, and thus we will experience all of the eschatological blessings that were promised to Abraham and his seed as well, all because of what Christ has done.

Verse 40: "So that apart from us they would not be made perfect." That idea of perfection is not moral perfection. It's not ultimate sanctification. That idea of perfect, or that word translated "perfect," has to do with bringing something to an end, to a completion, to its appointed purpose or goal. It's the *teleios*. It's the end result. So what

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is the goal or the end of faith? The goal or the end of faith is to stand on the other side of this life and in this world and then to look back and to say with utter confidence, “Everything that God has promised to me and to His people, He has fulfilled all of it exactly as He said He would fulfill it.” That's the end result.

And we are not brought to completion. They are not brought to completion. We are still not brought to completion even now. We have not been made perfect. They have not been made perfect. None of His people has reached the goal or the end of their faith. That is all still yet to come, so that we can see and attain to a better resurrection and stand in our flesh and see God and look upon Him with our eyes and worship Him in a new creation. That is the end result of our faith. That's the goal. That's the *teleios*, that's the completion, that's the perfection. And we have not reached that. They have not reached that. There is still the unfolding of all of God's redemptive purposes and plans until we reach that ultimate state of glory, but that is where everything is headed, so that we will be able to say with David, “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps. 16:10–11). That is the grand objective of our faith, to get to the end and to look back and to say that now I experience and fully realize everything that God has for me.

So why did they not see the fulfillment of that promise in their day? Why did they not see the heavenly kingdom in their day? Why is it still not perfect or complete or full for them? “So that,” verse 40 says, “apart from us they would not be made perfect.” This is the same idea that Peter expresses in 2 Peter 3:9 when he says the Lord is not slack concerning His promise; He is patient toward all His people, not willing that any whom He has given to the Son would perish, but that all would come to repentance. So as much as we long for the day of judgment, as much as we long for the return of Christ, as much as we might pray toward and anticipate and prepare ourselves for and hope for the ultimate coming of Christ and seeing Him face-to-face and being there with Him, as much as we might at times pray that God would wrap up this entire mess down here and accomplish His eschatological purposes and bring everything to completion and everything to pass, every day that the Lord Jesus Christ does not do that and return is a reminder to us that He is still gathering in His people each and every day. You know why the Lord has not returned right now? Because right now He still has people whom the Father has given to Him that He is bringing to Himself. And once all of His elect have been gathered in, then it's over, but not before that.

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What's the purpose of that? So that we would not be made perfect apart from them, those ones who still have to come to the Savior. And He delayed for our sake so that those Old Testament saints would not be made perfect apart from us. So aren't you glad, if you're in Jesus Christ, that He didn't bring in everything before you were born or you had a chance to enjoy this? Aren't you glad that the coming of Christ was not the day before He brought you to faith in Him? So His entire purpose in the delay and in the waiting of the fulfillment of His promises, He's not slack. He hasn't forgotten them. Every promise will be fulfilled in His perfect timing, but in the meantime, He is ensuring that none will perish of those whom the Father has given to Him, none will be lost, none will be forgotten, and none will fall away, and none will miss the kingdom. So all the delay is intended for that purpose. So while we wait and while we pray and while we prepare, we do so knowing that every day is a day of grace.

And if you're here today or you're hearing my voice on the live stream and you have not repented of your sin and trusted Christ for salvation, you have grace right now at this moment. You have opportunity right now at this moment. And listen, the Old Testament saints, they had a little bit of light. We have a degree of light and revelation that they could never have imagined. I think it was Calvin who said the Old Testament saints were led to Heaven, they came to Heaven, by just a little glimmering light. You and I stand in the full revelation of God and His redemptive purposes in the Person of Jesus Christ. Like standing under the noonday sun on a cloudless day, we have all of that light. We have all of that revelation. So as the author of Hebrews says in chapter 2, how will you escape if you neglect so great a salvation, which the Lord Himself has made known to us through His apostles, through His prophets, and in His Word? And if those Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11 were brought to Heaven on just a little bit of light, how much greater will be your accountability on the day of judgment if you neglect the light that you have been given?

So while we wait, we wait and pray, knowing that the delay is purposeful, it is to bring in His chosen ones. The end is certain. And so by faith, we endure, we hope, we trust, and we persevere.

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