

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS RESCUES BELIEVERS FROM JUDGMENT

Hebrews 11:28-31

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been threatened with mortal danger (been in danger of losing your life)? Have you ever been in a situation where basic survival was the only thing that you had to worry about? How does the threat of mortal danger affect you (or people in general)?

Mortal danger has the effect of focusing our minds and giving us clarity of vision. When the danger of dying confronts us nothing matters except escape. All the worries and concerns of "normal" life are of no consequence. The people to whom the letter to the Hebrews is written are facing mortal danger. They are in the midst of persecution; threatened with physical harm, loss of property and death because of their faith in Christ. The author is seeking to strengthen their resolve to remain faithful to Christ no matter what it costs them. In these four verses he looks at the faith of two individuals and two groups. What all four of these events share in common is that through faith in God's promises people escaped God's judgment. In each case the people who believe are delivered from God's wrath and those who do not believe perish. The author wants to put their present danger in perspective. Yes they might be killed because of their faith in Christ but they need to remember there is a fate worse than death. He aims to convince us that though faithfulness to Christ will result in the loss of earthly pleasure and perhaps even death, yet the worst thing that can happen to a human being will not happen to those who trust in Christ. Thus we should remain faithful no matter what harm is threatened.

STUDY

1. According to v. 28 Moses kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood by faith. What is it that he believed that moved him to do this? You may want to review Exodus 12.

First of all Moses believed that God was going to send the destroying angel to kill the firstborn sons of every household in Egypt and the firstborn male offspring of every animal in Egypt as well. The promised judgment was in

the future. It was unlike anything that Moses had ever experienced in his life. There was nothing in his experience that would enable him to understand or expect that such a thing could happen or would happen. Therefore, his faith is his conviction that this unseen, future event was without question going to happen because God said it would happen. Second, Moses believed that the blood of a slaughtered year old, unblemished male lamb that had lived in his home for 5 days when spread upon the doorway of his home would prevent the angel of death from killing his firstborn son or any of his firstborn male animals. The way we know that this is what he believed is because he did what God told him to do in order to be safe from the destroying angel. He spread the blood of this lamb on the sides of his door and over the top and thus the angel of death passed over his home. Moses would not have done what he did if he did not believe what he believed.

2. What was the result of Moses' by faith actions?

The angel of death, "the one who destroys the firstborn" did not touch them. All the firstborn sons of all the homes where the blood was applied escaped destruction.

3. The word used to describe the destroying angel is also used in the OT at Exodus 22:20, Joshua 7:25, Jeremiah 22:7, Haggai 2:22. Another related verb is used over 200 times and is translated in English, "to cut off," as at Exodus 31:14, Leviticus 18:29, Numbers 15:30, Psalm 34:16, 37:9, 22, 28, 34, 38, etc. What is it that the death of the firstborn ultimately is foreshadowing?

If you read through the account of God's destroying of Egypt's firstborn in Exodus 12 you cannot fail but be struck with how much of the language is used throughout the rest of the Bible in reference to God's judgment against sinners. He strikes down the firstborn. He sends his plague against them. He brings judgment on the gods of Egypt. There is loud wailing in the darkness throughout Egypt after the Lord kills all the firstborn. The judgment fell on all regardless of station in life, both rich and poor, both kings and slaves. All this language is used throughout the Bible to describe the horror of God's universal, eternal judgment. The destruction of the firstborn is a foreshadowing of hell, which is the expression of God's eternal, implacable hostility towards sinners.

4. What does the blood of the Passover lamb spread over the doorways foreshadow? See 1 Peter 1:18-19, John 1:29, 1 Corinthians 5:7b, Romans 3:25, 5:9.

This act of killing the year old male lamb who has lived with each family for 5 days and eating its body and putting its blood over the door is a clear representation of the death of Christ for the sins of his people. All who take refuge under the blood the lamb will escape the angel of death. The only way to escape the angel of death is by “eating” the body of Christ and by taking refuge under his blood.

5. What would it have felt like on that night, sitting at home with the blood on the door? What would you have been thinking about? What would have been your concerns? How would you have felt the next morning?

6. How would this image help the recipients of this letter? How does this help us?

The author to this letter by referring to Moses and the people keeping the Passover and sprinkling the blood on their door frames, reminds these tempted people that because of Christ they have been delivered from certain death at the hands of God’s destroying angel. If you have taken shelter under the blood of Jesus then the angel of death will pass over you and not destroy you in hell forever. If you do not trust in the blood of the lamb you will be destroyed when God sends the destroying angel into the world. All of us are always in mortal danger. The angel of death is coming. He could come at any time. None of us knows when and where he will strike next. Yet, escape from his destroying power is open to all who will take refuge in Christ, the lamb who was slain for all who will trust in him. Living by faith in him is the only way to be prepared for the certain judgment of God. Trust him now and keep on trusting him. Do not turn away.

It is only through persistent faith in Christ that we escape the angel of death.

7. Review Exodus 14. How did Israel respond to the sight of Pharaoh’s army?

They were terrified and said to Moses, for the first of many times, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? ... It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in

the desert.” Under the threat of the army they are ready to abandon God and his Savior Moses and return to Egypt.

8. Why would calling this event to the attention of people threatened with persecution and tempted to abandon Christ be helpful?

How appropriate is this for those to whom this letter is written! Like the Israelites, they have taken refuge under the blood of the lamb and so have left behind their former life as slaves of sin but now they are again threatened with harm. How will they respond? Will they return to Egypt by returning to their Judaism or will they believe God and go to the Land of Promise?

9. What is the point the author makes in v. 29 through the contrast between the Israelites and the Egyptian army?

It was by faith that the entire nation walked through the midst of the sea as if on dry land. In contrast, the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same were, literally, swallowed up. The obvious point is that the reason the Israelites were not drowned but passed safely through the water was because they had faith in God’s promises and that the Egyptians were swallowed up by the water because they did not have faith in God’s promises. Both the Israelites and the Egyptians performed the same action. They both went into the midst of the sea. The difference is that one of them had faith and the other one did not. The Israelites did not deserve to be kept safe, as was clearly seen in their response prior to crossing. The piled up water was a threat to them as well as a threat to the Egyptians. However they escaped being drowned because they believed that God would keep the waters from destroying them because of his promise to them. The Egyptians, on the other hand had no promise from God but acted presumptuously. They believed they were strong enough to escape the threat of the waters of God’s wrath. They did have faith but it was faith in their own strength, not in God’s promises.

10. How would this be helpful to people who were not tempted to become completely irreligious but who were tempted to trade Christianity for another religion and a religiously moral lifestyle?

There is a path or a way of life that leads through the waters of God’s judgment. While all who have faith must walk through that path it is possible to walk on it and yet not have faith. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:5 there are those “who have the appearance of godliness but who deny its power.” Or

as Jesus says in Matthew 7:24-25 there are those who profess faith in Jesus as Lord and who pray and even drive out demons and perform miracles in the name of Jesus but whom Jesus does not know. You can, like the Egyptians, attempt to follow the path of the faithful but to do so trusting in your own strength and not the strength of Christ. It is only those who walk this path by faith in Christ who will safely pass through the waters of God's judgment.

11. Are you trusting in your moral/religious lifestyle, your work or in Christ's life and death on your behalf?

It is only through persistent faith in Christ that we safely pass through the flood of God's judgment.

12. The author skips over 40 years of Israelite history between verses 29 and 30. Why is that? See Hebrews 3:7-19.

The author skips over those forty years of Israel's history without comment. There is a reason for this. He is seeking to illustrate what faith is and what it does and the period of time from when Israel crosses the Red Sea until entering the land of Canaan is not a time of faith but a time of unbelief and disobedience. He has already referred to this time period in chapter 3 where he uses the unbelief of Israel and God's declaration that they will never enter his rest as an example for these professing Christians to not shrink back from Christ but to boldly follow him where he leads. Now he uses the days of Joshua and of Israel's entering into the Land of Promise as a positive example of what faith is and what faith does.

13. Review Joshua 6. Hebrews 11:30 says it was by faith that the walls of Jericho fell down. What did the people of Israel believe and how does that contrast with what their parents believed as stated in Numbers 13:31-14:4?

The author says at the end of chapter 3 that the reason the generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt did not enter the rest that God promised was because of their unbelief. Now here we find the children of that disobedient generation coming to the first barrier hindering their entry into the land of rest, which is the fortified city of Jericho. It was the sight of cities like this that provoked unbelief in their parents and subjected them to forty years of desert wandering until they all died. How will they respond to the same threat? The Lord commands them to march around the city once a day for seven days in silence. Then on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, the day of rest, they are to march around the city seven times. When they finish their

last circuit the priests are to blow the trumpets and the people are to shout and when they do the walls of Jericho will fall down and then they are to go into the city and destroy all who live there. Their faith was demonstrated in their obeying the word of God. They did what God said and the barrier that hindered their entrance into the land was destroyed. It was by faith in the word of God that they were enabled to enter the rest of God. They were united to the promise of God by their faith and thus what stood between them and the Promised Land fell. How foolish would God's command and promise have appeared to those living in Jericho, indeed to anyone who knew anything about taking fortified cities? How can marching around a city for seven days in silence and then seven times on the seventh day and ending with a shout and a trumpet blast bring down fortified walls? There was no reason to expect this strategy to work except for this one reason: God said it would work.

14. In chapter 4 the Land of Promise is used as a metaphor for the new heavens and the new earth, the "rest" of God in his restored creation. What are some of the barriers standing between us and the "rest" of God that the city of Jericho represents?

There are fortresses and barriers that are designed to keep us out of the Promised Land. The threat of loss for the sake of Christ, our sins, the enticement of this world's pleasures, false ideas about God and his salvation, persecution, the lies and fury of the devil, etc are all arrayed against us to keep us from obtaining what God has promised.

15. How are we to overcome these barriers? See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Acts 20:32?

We overcome all these barriers by the foolishness of the cross of Jesus. How can a guy dying on a cross 2000 years ago actually destroy sin and death and the devil and hell? How can his death gain forgiveness of my sins and obtain eternal life for me? What possible reason can you give as to why we should trust in this bloody death? The reason we trust is because the God who made everything and who rules over all things has told us that this cross is the weapon that will destroy every barrier standing between us and heaven. We have, in the word of God as we read it and hear it and then believe it the means by which every hindrance can be thrown down. God's word of grace, his good news of the cross of Christ is the trumpet blast that overthrows everything standing between you and heaven. As we trust in the foolishness of the cross and of living a crucified life we will discover like the

Israelites that the walls will come down so that we can enter into God's promised rest.

It is only through persistent faith in Christ that we overcome all that separates us from heaven.

16. What makes v. 31 so shocking?

The last person whose faith the author describes is a non-Jewish woman named Rahab who was a prostitute and who lived in the city of Jericho, which is full of idol worshipping, child sacrificing, sexually immoral, greedy people who hate God and God's people and whom God has determined to destroy. It is shocking that such a person would be placed in the same list and on the same level as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. This Gentile prostitute is treated as if she is no different from these giants of biblical history. The author includes her instead of a whole host of other well known OT characters that he could have used to illustrate faith.

17. What are some reasons he included her in this list? See Ephesians 2:8-9 w/ Hebrews 3:18, Galatians 3:26-29 & Matthew 1:5-6.

First and foremost it is because she had faith in the promises of God regarding his purpose to destroy the Canaanites and give their land to his people Israel. She exhibited her faith by hiding the two spies at risk of her own life. She betrayed her city and joined herself and her family to the people of God because she was absolutely certain that Jericho would be destroyed and that Israel was going to take over the land of Canaan. She had heard the stories of how Yahweh had delivered Israel from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea forty years prior to Israel's appearing on the eastern shore of the Jordan River. When she heard, she believed. She trusted that what this God said was going to happen, would happen. Jericho would be destroyed and Israel would rule Canaan. Nothing mattered to her except escaping that coming judgment and belonging to the people of God.

But she is also included to show that God's salvation is not limited by race or gender or religion or relative sinfulness. Rahab demonstrates that God's salvation is open to people of every nationality and ethnicity, to men and women, to those raised in Christian homes and those raised in Moslem homes and, most importantly, without regard to how sinful you have been. Rahab stands as evidence that God's salvation is not based upon any human consideration. God saves whom he will, according to grace, not according to merit. He pays no attention to what human beings pay attention to. The

fact that salvation is not based on human performance is seen in v. 31 in another way. Notice how the people who live in Jericho are described: "those who were disobedient." This exact same phrase is used to describe all those Jewish people who God killed in the desert over the forty years of wandering following their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. The Jewish people God rescued from Egypt and the idol worshippers who lived in Jericho are no different from one another. Neither group deserves God's kindness. Both are sinful and deserve condemnation. If any are saved from either group it must be by grace through faith. So just as Joshua and Caleb were the only ones saved out of the generation of disobedient Jews so only Rahab and her family are saved out of the disobedient residents of Jericho. Prostitution is an ugly and poisonous sin. Make no mistake, prostitutes and their customers deserve divine judgment. Rahab is not saved from destruction because her sins were somehow not as bad as the rest of those who lived there. She is forgiven and rescued from destruction and given a place in God's family because she trusted the promises of God, not because she somehow earned her salvation. Her action of saving the two spies from her murderous fellow citizens was the fruit of her faith, not the cause of her salvation.

There is another reason that Rahab is included in this list. Rahab eventually married a man named Salmon from the tribe of Judah. They had a son named Boaz who, like his father, married a Gentile woman named Ruth who through faith joined herself to the people of God. Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed who had a son named Jesse who had a son named David and the Son of David is our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Rahab, through faith in the promises of God is fully accepted as a member of God's family. She is not a second class Christian because she was a prostitute and a Gentile and a woman.

18. Do your sins and failures ever appear too great to be forgiven? Do you ever feel like a second class Christian? What should you do about that?

It is only through persistent faith in Christ that we, though disobedient will not perish with the disobedient.