

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE THROUGH FAITH

Hebrews 11:32-40

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

When have you felt the most hopeless in life? What kinds of circumstances provoke feelings of despair most often in your life?

Regardless of the circumstances of your life Jesus is the only one who is able to make you right with God and to gain for you God's help. This is what the author to this letter to the Hebrews aims to convince us of as he completes his survey of how OT characters obtained all the promises of God through faith in Christ as he was revealed in the promises God made to them. He concludes this section with a series of rapid-fire allusions to a great company of diverse people who lived by faith in Christ in incredibly diverse circumstances. The goal of this study is that we be convinced that regardless of what conditions we may find ourselves in, God is able to help us as long as we are willing to live by faith in Christ. The solution to whatever difficulties we may find ourselves in is Christ. The gospel of Jesus is the most relevant thing in the world and this is what we will see as we work our way through this passage because God, through the gospel, provides help in any and every situation as we trust in Christ.

STUDY

1. Why does the author say in v. 32, "...I do not have time to tell about...?"

He has just made reference to about 17 specific examples of people in the OT in chronological order, who lived by faith in God's promise to renew the universe and bring them to live with him in that renewed universe through a savior. But now he acknowledges that if he were to continue with this procedure he would end up writing a much longer

letter than he has the time to write and they have the time to read. "There is more to be said but I don't have time to say it."

2. Why does he go on to list these 6 individuals followed by a group and then followed by 17 actions performed through faith? What is the main point, the big idea?

He makes a list of people and events to show that everyone in the OT who is commended by God or shown in a positive light lived by faith in God's promises. Or to use the language of 11:1, everyone in the OT who lived and died for God did so because they were absolutely certain that the promised future was a present certainty. Confidence that the promised future good was a certainty was what motivated every person alluded to in these verses to do what they did. The first four individual's stories are recorded in the 7th book of the OT, the book of Judges which is the history immediately following the story of Joshua and his leading the people of Israel to take over the land of Canaan. The two most prominent of the judges were Gideon and Samson, whereas Barak and Jephthah were lesser known judges. Then David is the first faithful king of Israel and represents not only himself but the 9 other faithful kings of Judah. Samuel was the last of the judges and the first of the prophets in the OT. He then stands at the head of all the prophets who are named last. After listing these individuals as representatives of all the faithful in the OT he then begins to list all that the faithful did by faith. There is an enormous variety of people and of circumstances contained in this list. The point of the variety is to show us that it doesn't matter who you are, who your parents were or what circumstances you may find yourself in: through faith in Jesus Christ you can do whatever God tells you to do. The promise isn't you can do whatever you want to do through Christ but you can do whatever God calls you to do through Christ.

3. Let's play a game. Divide the group into two teams. Give each team 5 minutes to write down as many people from the OT as they can to whom the 17 "actions" might refer. The actions are listed here:

- Conquered kingdoms: Moses, Joshua, David,
- Administered justice: Joseph, Moses, all the judges of Israel, Samuel, David and the "good" kings

- Gained what was promised: *Joshua destroying Jericho and Ai and the whole land of Canaan, Gideon with the Midianites, David*
- Shut the mouths of lions: *Samson, David, Daniel*
- Quenched the power of fire: *Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-nego*
- Escaped the edge of the sword: *Elijah, David, Peter*
- Weakness turned to strength: *Blind Samson at the end of his life*
- Became powerful in battle and put foreign armies to flight: *David and Goliath, Gideon, Jehosophat, Hezekiah, Elisha*
- Women received back their dead by resurrection: *Widow of Zarephath's son by Elijah, Shunamite woman's son by Elisha*
- Tortured and refused to accept release: *Zechariah, Apostle Paul*
- Faced jeers and flogging: *Jeremiah*
- Chained and put in prison: *Michiah, Jeremiah,*
- Stoned: *Zechariah, Stephen, Paul*
- Sawn in two: *there is an ancient Jewish tradition that this is how Isaiah died. The original audience would have known of this.*
- Put to death by the sword: *Prophets by Jezebel, Andrew, John the Baptist*
- Went about in goatskins and sheepskins; destitute, persecuted and mistreated: *Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist*
- Wandered about in deserts, mountains, caves and dens of earth: *Moses, Elijah being kept alive at the Kidron Brook by ravens, the 7000 prophets kept alive by Yahweh during Jezebel's reign of terror*

4. Review one of the incidents alluded to in vv. 33-35a and answer this question: how did the person(s) in this story live by faith? What are the principles of living by faith we can observe in this incident?

Example: what do we learn about living by faith as we observe how Gideon destroyed the Midianite army with an "army" of 300. God commands weak people to do impossible things. He also promises that if we will do what he commands that he will through us perform the impossible. Our part is to believe his promise and act in accordance with what is promised. Gideon got three hundred men to hold up torches and blow trumpets in the middle of the night. He did this through or by means of his faith in God's promise to wipe out the Midianites. God did the hard part. He wiped them out. Gideon's faith did not do anything. There is no power in Gideon. Rather his faith

connected him to the God of infinite power. Gideon had to believe two things: that God would do what he promised and that what God promised to do was better than hiding his grain from the Midianites and hoarding it for himself and his family. Gideon had to do some very uncomfortable things in order to be a part of God's work but it was not his work that was determinative. God did the work while Gideon participated in what God did by his faith.

5. What are some impossible things God is commanding you to do? What actions are you taking by faith in obedience to God?

Examples: Parents, God commands you to raise these hard hearted, sinful enemies of God, that is, your children, in the training and instruction of the Lord. You have no ability to bring about their conversion to Christ. All you can do is by faith preach the gospel to them, teach them the Bible and model the Christian life in front of them. You cannot save them and yet you are commanded to bring them up in the Lord. Husbands, God commands you to love your wives by dying like Jesus so that your wife feels the love of God in and through your love. There is no way you are able to die and there is no way that your weak efforts can ever persuade your wife that she is loved by God. Only God can do that. The only way you can do what God tells you to do is by trusting him to do what you cannot do and trusting that dying is a more sure way to be happy than demanding your own way. Wives, God is commanding you to submit to your husband like the church submits to Christ so that the greatness of Christ is seen by your husband and shown by your marriage. Only God can do this. All of us are commanded by God to do good works in such a way that people who see us praise God. You are a weak, miserable creature and have no ability to live this way. Neither do you have any ability to persuade others of God's greatness by your half-hearted efforts. Only God can do this. Yet we must trust God to do what we cannot do and we must trust that doing good works for the glory of God is a more certain path to joy than living to please ourselves. God commands every person sitting in this room to love and forgive every other person sitting in this room so that the whole world will look at us and see that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world. If you don't know how hard that is, then you've never tried to love these people. Again, you and I have no power to show that Christ

is great through our love, but God does. So we must act in love towards one another trusting Christ for the ability to do so and believing that loving other Christians for the glory of Christ is infinitely superior to just taking care of ourselves and our own families. God is commanding you to do impossible things. If you are a true Christian then you will act as though God is going to do what he has promised and that what he promises is the best thing in the universe.

6. How are the events listed in vv. 35b-38 different from those listed in vv. 33-35a?

The events listed in vv. 33-35a while all entailing risk and some hardship result in victory or deliverance or some other earthly success or benefit. Every person involved in these events obtained at least some positive outcome in this life whereas all the events/actions from the second half end badly from the point of view of comfort and success in this life. Consider these specific examples of the contrast: In 35a we are told that the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman both received back their dead sons by resurrection through faith, the first by the ministry of Elijah and the second by the ministry of Elisha. Here are women and prophets who believed that God would bring dead boys back from the dead and he did. However, immediately following he tells us that others, by faith in God's promises, were tortured. They were offered release from their torture by renouncing their faith but they did not recant and thus they were tortured and killed. How did they do this? They did it by believing that there was a "better resurrection" coming and it was far better to be tortured and to be a part of that resurrection than to renounce their faith in Christ and escape pain and death now but lose out on that better resurrection. What is this resurrection referred to here at the end "better than?" It is better than the resurrection those two boys experienced. Being tortured and killed leads to a better result than having your dead son brought back to you. Why? It is better because the boys, while raised to life still died but that future resurrection will never end. So by faith people are brought back from the dead and then die later and by faith people die and stay dead until the return of Christ and that final permanent resurrection.

The thing I really want you to notice is the contrast between these two lists of acts that are performed by faith. Notice the first clause in v. 34. Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were told that if they would bow down and worship the idol that Nebuchadnezzar made then their lives would be spared but if they refused they would be thrown into the fiery furnace. They, like the people mentioned at the end of v. 35 refused to accept release believing in that better resurrection. However, God delivered them from that fire. They did not die but were kept alive. Yet, in v. 35 we are told of others, like Zechariah the prophet or Stephen the first Christian martyr who also were faithful to God but whom God did not deliver. They were both stoned and not delivered from death as were Daniel's three friends. Notice also in v. 35 there were some who by faith escaped the edge of the sword. We might think of David escaping Saul's sword or Elijah escaping Jezebel's sword. But then look at v. 37, there were others who by faith were killed with the sword. We might think of the numerous prophets who were killed by Jezebel and her husband King Ahab. In the NT there is this amazing contrast in Acts 12 where we read that Herod kills James, the brother of the apostle John with the sword and then he arrests Peter in order to do the same thing to him. However, the Lord sends an angel to break Peter out of prison and so he escapes the edge of the sword.

7. What unites these events?

All the people in both lists do what they do, whether good outcome or bad, through or by means of faith.

8. What is the point of this comparison and contrast?

What is the difference between James and Peter, between Elijah who escaped Jezebel's sword and the prophets whom Jezebel killed? Why did an angel miraculously deliver Peter but not James? Is what makes them different that one had faith and the other did not? NO!! That is the whole point of this list. They both had faith. By faith one escaped and by faith one died. Why is that? God has a plan that entails Andrew dying by faith and Peter escaping by faith. God is in charge, not us. Your faith has no power. God has all the power. He is in charge. Our responsibility is to live by faith in the promises of God. It

is his business to determine whether I live in a palace and dress like a king as did David or dress in the skin of a goat and live in a cave like Elijah. God decides whether I die of cancer by faith or I am cured of cancer by faith. God decides if I have a comfortable marriage by faith or I live in an uncomfortable marriage by faith. Therefore, there is suffering and loss that God is asking you to endure in faith. It may not be God's will for you to be healed, for you to have a perfect Christian marriage, for you to have children who all love him, for you to get that girl or that boy, for you to get that good paying job. It might be God's will for you to quit your job, go to seminary and then move to India with your family to preach the gospel and then to have your daughter die of a disease. We do not know what his will for us will bring to us. We only know that it is his will that you live by faith in Christ no matter what happens. The beauty of the gospel is that you can always be a Christian, no matter what happens to you or what people do to you. Therefore if it is your goal to be a Christian, to live with God and be loved by him forever, then nothing can harm you. You can always be happy and do the right thing, no matter what happens.

9. John Calvin says this about vv. 35b-38: "... the victory of faith appears more splendid in the contempt of death than if life were extended to the fifth generation. It is a more glorious evidence of faith, and worthy of higher praise, when reproaches, want, and extreme troubles are borne with resignation and firmness, than when recovery from sickness is miraculously obtained, or any other benefit from God." Do you agree or disagree and why?

10. What are some sufferings you are enduring through faith?

11. What does v. 39 mean? See Heb 11:13-16.

While all these people lived by faith and God testified to their faith by including their story in the Bible and all received a portion of God's promised blessings as David did when he became king or Gideon when he defeated the Midianites or even goatskin clad Elijah in his victory over the prophets of Baal, yet none of them received the full promise, that is life lived with God forever in resurrected bodies in the restored heavens and earth. Every promise God made in the past was ultimately referring to this ultimate fulfillment. Therefore, all of those

who died prior to the coming of Christ only saw the promises and greeted them from afar.

12. According to v. 40 why is it that God waited so long to bring Christ into the world and why is he still waiting to bring Christ back again?

The reason is because he has a plan to save all of his people through Christ at the same time. That is what v. 40 tells us. God has been working throughout all of history to one end, the bringing together of all things under Christ. God has a perfect ending for the story of the universe. That perfect ending is when all of God's people from throughout all of the millennium of human existence are gathered together around his throne in the new heavens and the new earth to worship him and the lamb who was slain. There has always been one people of God and always there has been one plan of God to save that one people of God through his one Savior, Jesus Christ. This is that perfect ending where people from every tribe and tongue and nation are brought together in one, united choir of praise to the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone who is part of that company will be there for no other reason than the fact that Jesus did what they never did. He obeyed God's law, he died the death we deserve, and he conquered sin and death and hell for his faithful people. Thus all who are united to him by their faith in him and who have lived their life by faith in Christ will joyfully join in that perfect world of love and praise to God.

13. Is this perfect ending to God's story what you are longing for (See 2 Timothy 4:8) or do you have a different dream (2 Timothy 4:10a)?