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OVERCOMING FAITH

Hebrews 11:27-29

By

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Hebrews Lesson 41

Overcoming Faith Hebrews 11:27-29

Peter Cameron Scott was a gifted young singer whose dream was to be an opera star. He was on the steps of an opera house, about to answer an ad for chorus singers, when he faced the crucial decision of his life. As Ruth Tucker tells it, (*From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* [Zondervan], p. 300; the following story is gleaned from pp. 300-304, and from *Global Prayer Digest*, 10/84):

Would he seek a life of self-glory and applause under the spotlight of the entertainment world, or would he dedicate his life to God's service, no matter how humble and obscure the circumstances? It was a moment of crisis in the young man's life, but the decision was final. He chose to serve God.

Scott enrolled at the New York Missionary Training College. After graduation, he sailed for Africa in 1890. His brother soon joined him, but quickly died from the harsh conditions. Peter built his brother's coffin and dug the grave himself. Soon his own health was broken and he went to England. There his hope was renewed as he read the inscription on David Livingstone's grave in Westminster Abbey: "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold."

Scott went to America and recruited others to join him in the cause of reaching Africa with the gospel. With seven others, including his sister, he returned to Africa in October, 1895. In his first year's report, four stations had been opened, educational and medical programs had been set up, and the missionaries were making progress in learning the languages.

But shortly after this optimistic report, Scott, age 29, fell ill and died in December, 1896, just 14 months after returning to Africa. Soon after, several other workers died. Others had to give up for health reasons. By the summer of 1899, only one missionary remained on the field. The area became known as "the white man's graveyard." More missionaries died than people became Christians during those first years. But other missionaries came, packing their belongings in coffins. The Africans were amazed by their determi-

nation. They said, "Surely only a message of great importance would inspire such actions!" In 1971, the Africa Inland Mission became the Africa Inland Church, numbering about one and a half million, under African leadership.

If time allowed, I could tell other stories of overcoming faith on the part of courageous missionaries. Our text tells of the faith of Moses and the people of Israel when they came out of slavery in Egypt. The lesson is that...

Faith overcomes enormous obstacles,
enduring by seeing the unseen God.

There are three obstacles here that faith had to overcome.

THE FIRST OBSTACLE: POWERFUL OPPOSITION:

1. Faith overcomes powerful opposition by seeing the unseen God (11:27).

Moses left Egypt twice: first, after he killed the Egyptian slave driver; and, again in the exodus. To which departure does this verse refer? The chronological order, along with the singular reference ("he left") favor the first departure. But Exodus 2:14-15 says that Moses was afraid when he learned that the news of his killing the Egyptian was known, and that he fled from Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. So the phrase, "not fearing the wrath of the king," favors the second departure.

Those who argue for the first departure explain that Moses fled, not out of personal fear of Pharaoh, but because he was aware of his destiny as the deliverer of the covenant people (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 497-499). I find that unconvincing. The author has already inverted the chronological order twice in this chapter (compare 11:17-21 with 11:13; also, in 11:21). A singular reference is used in verse 28 describing the Passover, even though the entire Jewish nation did it. So I understand 11:27 to refer to the exodus, when Moses courageously stood up to Pharaoh. Verses 28 & 29 refer to two events that took place during the exodus. There are three lessons in 11:27:

- A. Faith often puts us into opposition with powerful forces.

From somewhere—I'm not sure where—many Christians have the naïve notion that when you yield your life to God and

begin to follow His purpose, all of your problems evaporate! Maybe it's from the "sales pitch," "Would you like an abundant life? Follow Jesus!" People think, "Sure, I could handle an abundant life!" So they sign up for the program, only to encounter abundant *trials*. Life before they trusted Christ was relatively calm compared to what they experience afterwards!

The verb, "left," may be translated "forsook" (New KJV). It refers to what we saw in 11:24-26, that when Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, he forfeited the treasures of Egypt. When Moses forsook Egypt, he didn't step into something better. Instead, he embraced a difficult situation that had no chance of success, apart from God's power. To stand against Pharaoh was suicidal, unless God protected Moses. To lead two million people into the desert without food or water was genocidal, unless God protected them. Pharaoh was a powerful despot with an army of trained warriors at his disposal. Moses was leading a disorganized bunch of untrained, defenseless slaves. Humanly speaking, it was not even a contest.

When you believe the gospel and submit to Jesus Christ, you declare yourself to be the enemy of the prince of the power of the air, who commands an army of evil spirits intent on your destruction. That's why the Christian life is often portrayed as warfare. Don't be surprised by opposition; expect it!

B. Faith enables us to obey God without fear.

Moses encountered the wrath of the king. Whenever you attempt to follow God's path for your life, someone will get angry at you. In Moses' case, it was Pharaoh. In your case, it may be a family member, an employer, a professor at the university, or a friend. The more powerful that person is, the more difficult it is to fear God more than you fear that person. Proverbs 19:12 observes, "The king's wrath is like the roaring of a lion." If there were no cage separating you from the lion's roar, it would be rather frightening! But Moses stood before Pharaoh and boldly said, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Let My people go...'" (Exod. 5:1).

A. W. Pink observes, "Faith and fear are opposites, and yet, strange to say, they are often found dwelling within the same breast; but where one is dominant the other is dormant" (*Exposition*

of Hebrews [Ephesians Four Group, CD, p. 804). Moses probably had some butterflies in his stomach as he prepared to go before Pharaoh. Martin Luther fought off anxiety at the Diet of Worms as he appealed to Scripture and said, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." Faith in God enabled these men to obey Him and overcome any fear.

Fear can come in various forms. It is not always as dramatic as Moses' showdown with Pharaoh. As I was preparing the outline and about to start writing this message, I received a call from a doctor who informed me that my recent PSA test indicates that there is a one-in-five chance that I have prostate cancer. He recommended that I schedule a biopsy. I once wrote an article about the danger of preaching. I called it, "The Gospel Boomerang," because you think that you're aiming your sermon at others, but God brings it back to hit you first! He has this unnerving habit of making me practice what I preach!

How do we get the faith to overcome the fear of powerful opposition, in whatever form it appears?

C. Faith overcomes powerful opposition by seeing the unseen God.

Moses did not fear the wrath of the king, "for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen." There is intended irony in that phrase. "No one has seen God at any time" (1 John 4:12). Moses had seen a manifestation of God at the burning bush. He spoke with God "face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod. 33:11). He would later ask to see God, and God allowed him to see His "back" (Exod. 33:22-23). Jesus told the twelve, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Thus when we are fearful, we need to draw near to the Lord Jesus by faith. "Seeing Him who is unseen" takes us back to Hebrews 11:1, that faith is "the conviction [or, proof] of things not seen." Faith is like a telescope that brings a distant object into visible focus. If fear is looming larger than your faith, take time to draw near to God in His Word and prayer. As Paul instructs us (Phil. 4:6-7), "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all com-

prehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Don’t leave out the *thanksgiving!* That’s how you express faith and submission to God in your prayers. Faith overcomes powerful opposition by seeing the unseen God.

THE SECOND OBSTACLE: GOD’S IMPENDING JUDGMENT

2. Faith trusts in God’s sacrifice for deliverance from His judgment (11:28).

Moses has just endured the wrath of the king; now he has to be saved from the wrath of God. “By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.” At the culmination of the plagues, God gave Moses instructions for how Israel was to observe the Passover (Exod. 12). At the heart of that celebration was the sacrifice of an unblemished male lamb. Its blood was to be smeared on the doorposts and lintel of each house. God warned that He would go through the land on that night and kill every firstborn male in homes that did not have the blood on the doorposts.

The New Testament is clear that Christ is our Passover Lamb who was slain (1 Cor. 5:7). If you have seen the Jews for Jesus presentation, “Christ in the Passover,” you know that not just the lamb, but just about every detail in that ceremony, speaks about Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. It was at the Passover that Jesus took the bread and the wine and instituted the Lord’s Supper as a remembrance of His death. Note three applications of Hebrews 11:28:

- A. All people face the threat of God’s impending judgment.

It was not only the Egyptians, but also the Jews, who faced God’s impending judgment of the death of their firstborn if they did not apply the blood of the lamb to their doorposts. Being a Jew by birth would not have spared anyone. Being a decent, hard-working person who had never committed a crime would not have gained an exception. While *Moses’* faith is mentioned in 11:28, his faith did not cover all of the Jewish homes. Each home had to apply the blood as God had commanded or they would suffer the consequences.

Romans 3:23 states, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Every person is born alienated from God. Both

pagan Gentiles and religious Jews are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Whether we recognize it or not, we all are born hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7-8). In that condition, we are a heartbeat away from incurring His eternal judgment.

Many professing Christians do not like this truth. They stumble over the idea that “a God of love would judge people who have never heard.” Moses warned Israel about the death of their firstborn, but the Egyptians had no such warning. Some would say that while it was okay for God to judge Pharaoh, since he had hardened his heart, God was not fair to strike down the sons of all Egyptians. But God struck down the firstborn in every Egyptian home, in order to make a distinction between Egypt and Israel (Exod. 11:7; 12:29, 30).

The accusation that God is not fair to judge sinners minimizes the holiness of God and the sinfulness of every person on earth. God would be perfectly fair to send every sinner straight to hell. He does not owe salvation to anyone, because none deserve it. God’s sovereign election does not keep anyone out of heaven that wants to go there, because if God left people to themselves, *none* would seek Him (Rom. 3:10-12). If He had not chosen us, we would have continued in rebellion against Him until the day we died. Election results in millions going to heaven who otherwise would never have gone there (see Eph. 1:4-5; Eph. 2:5; Rev. 5:9).

B. God has appointed a way of deliverance from His judgment through the blood of a substitute.

The elaborate instructions for how to carry out the Passover may have seemed like a hassle to some. For one thing, it was not cheap. Every family had to sacrifice a lamb, or if the family was too small, they could join another family (Exod. 12:4). The blood had to be applied to the doorposts and lintel. God specifically warned them (Exod. 12:13), “The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.”

The blood of the Passover lamb was a type, of course, of the blood of Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the cross, He died as a substitute for sinners. As John wrote (1 John 2:2), “and He Himself

is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." In other words, the offer is extended to every sinner, Jew or Gentile: It obviously does not mean that Christ actually paid for all the sins of all people, or else all would be saved, which Scripture plainly denies. Rather, it means that Christ's sacrifice "extends to all who by faith embrace the gospel" (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on 1 John 2:2, p. 173). Thus...

- C. God's way of deliverance must be applied by faith in order to be effective.

To be delivered through the Passover blood, Moses and the Israelites had to trust God's word and do what He told them to do. If anyone disputed it by saying, "It's not logical that sprinkling blood on your doorposts would protect your oldest son from death," his son would have died. It would not have been enough to say mentally, "I believe," but not apply the blood. To be saved from the destroyer, the person had to believe God's warning by applying the blood.

The same is true with the blood of Christ. You can argue that God is a God of love, not judgment, and that you don't need the blood of Christ to be saved. You will someday learn too late that He is a God who judges sinners. Perhaps you grew up in a Christian home and you believe in a general sense, but you have not personally fled to the cross. James (2:19) warns us that the demons also believe in that manner, but they will not be saved. Unlike the Passover, it is not enough for your father to believe on your behalf.

To be saved, you must acknowledge that as a sinner you deserve God's judgment. You must abandon all trust in yourself or your good works as a means of salvation. And you must trust in Christ's blood as God's payment for *your* sins. Every sinner must apply the blood of Christ to his or her heart by faith to be saved from God's judgment. Finally, there is...

THE THIRD OBSTACLE: OVERWHELMING PROBLEMS:

- 3. Faith trusts God for deliverance from overwhelming problems (11:29).

This verse shifts from Moses' faith to the faith of Israel. I do not know why the shift did not take place in verse 28, since all Israel had to believe in the Passover sacrifice. Either way, there is a

difficulty, in that as the author of Hebrews has already told us, the generation that came out of Egypt was evil and unbelieving (3:8-12). The apostle Paul explained that although all Israel was baptized into Moses, so to speak, when they passed through the sea, "with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness" (1 Cor. 10:2, 5). But here the author indicates that they passed through the Red Sea *by faith*.

Probably the solution is that the faith of the believing remnant is generalized to cover the entire nation (John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], 7:170; Calvin, p. 299 adopts a similar solution). There is a similar situation in the New Testament when everyone on the ship with Paul was saved because of Paul's faith, even though they did not believe God. In both cases, it was temporal deliverance only for the unbelievers. But the exodus pictures spiritually how genuine faith delivers us from overwhelming problems, beginning with the salvation of our souls. Briefly, note two things:

- A. Faith does not exempt us from overwhelming problems, but rather it often leads us into such problems.

If Israel had stayed in Egypt, they wouldn't be in the mess they were in at the Red Sea. Some of the unbelievers sarcastically said to Moses (Exod. 14:11), "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" But the fact is, Moses had not led them to the dire situation that they were in; *God* had led them there and *He* had hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would chase after them (Exod. 14:1-9)!

So by God's direct actions, this defenseless bunch of slaves had the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh's army charging at them from behind. They were doomed unless God intervened, which He planned to do. But they had to learn that salvation is *completely* from Him. There was no place for human ingenuity or some scheme to escape. God led them into this desperate situation to teach them to trust Him as their only option.

That's how God grows our faith. We know in our heads that we must trust Him totally, but we don't believe it in practice until He throws us into situations where there is no way out if He does

not act. We need to learn in experience that “salvation belongs to the Lord” (Ps. 3:8).

- B. God delights to turn our overwhelming problems into exhibitions of His mighty power when we trust Him.

The situation that the enemy thought would bring them an easy victory led to their defeat. God miraculously piled the water up as a wall on both sides for Israel to walk through on dry ground (Exod. 14:21-22). He moved the pillar of cloud behind them until they all passed through. Then He let the Egyptians pursue them in blind fury. They should have looked to both sides and seen the trap. But as John Owen observes (pp. 173-174), “There is no such blinding, hardening lust in the minds or hearts of men, as hatred of the people of God and desire for their ruin.” The Egyptians abandoned reason and common sense and rushed into the sea to their own destruction. And so a helpless, defenseless, unorganized band of two million slaves were delivered from a powerful, well-equipped army. Nothing is too difficult for the Lord (Jer. 32:17)!

Conclusion

So faith overcomes enormous obstacles, enduring by seeing the unseen God. “But,” you may be wondering, “what about Peter Cameron Scott and all of his fellow missionaries that died young while trying to take the gospel into Africa? Their faith did not deliver them!”

John G. Paton (1824-1907), who left his native Scotland to take the gospel to the cannibals of the New Hebrides Islands, answers that question well. As he was getting ready to leave, an elderly friend repeatedly sought to deter him. His crowning argument was always, “The Cannibals! You will be eaten by Cannibals!”

Paton finally replied, “Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is to be soon laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or worms. And in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer” (*John G. Paton Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], p. 56). Let’s join Paton and Moses as people of overcoming faith, who endure by seeing the unseen God!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important for Christians to expect opposition and hardship? Why do many naively think that the Christian life will be trouble-free?
2. Is all fear sin? Can fear and faith abide together? How can we overcome our fears?
3. Why was God fair to judge the Egyptians without letting them know in advance? Why is He free to choose Israel (or us) as His people?
4. Someone says, "Many Christians have trusted God and have been killed, not delivered. Why should I trust in such a God?" How would you answer?

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