

# “Something Better for Us”

## The Twenty First in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 11:29-40; Daniel 3:8-30*

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Throughout Hebrews 11, the author uses the phrase “by faith” in reference to the particular individuals singled out for mention in this well-known chapter of the Bible. Those mentioned here—who are found throughout the whole of the Old Testament, prior to the dawn of the messianic age—believed that God would keep his covenant promise. But for everyone on the list, the fulfillment of that promise was still far off in the distant future. As the author of Hebrews has been pointing out, it was not until the coming of Jesus Christ that the exact nature of God’s covenant promise and the wonderful benefits our Lord secures for us become clear. That for which these Old Testament saints longed, is for us, a glorious and present reality. What God had promised to the Old Testament saints, is now fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Last time we took up the closing verses of Hebrews 11, the so-called “hall of faith.” As we have seen throughout our time in this chapter, the author of Hebrews is making the point that there has always been one covenant promise—“I will be your God and you will be my people”—and that this same covenant promise unfolds throughout the pages of the Old Testament. In Hebrews 11, the author appeals to a litany of well-known people who believed this promise. Although the people mentioned here serve as an example to us of sorts, the author’s primary purpose in this chapter is *not* to present these Old Testament saints as examples for us to emulate. Rather, his purpose is to remind his Jewish readers that the same promise which these Old Testament saints believed, pointed ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ, in whom the promise has been fulfilled. Therefore, the author’s emphasis falls on the continuity of the covenant promise (God’s promise does not change across time), not so much on the example these saints set for us—some of whom, as we will see, were not very saintly.

As we have spent time in this chapter, I have divided it into sections based upon the biblical time period in which those mentioned lived. In verses 1-3, the author defined faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,*” before mentioning three men who lived before the great flood (Abel, Enoch, and Noah, in verses 4-7). Next, in verses 8-16, the author takes up a discussion of Abraham and his belief that the land of promise (Canaan) pointed beyond itself “*to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” When seen through the eyes of faith, earthly prosperity and blessing points ahead to eternal and spiritual realities. In verses 17-22, the author moves from the account of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, to Joseph—this is the era of the patriarchs. In verses 23-28, the author turns to Moses and the Passover—Israel’s time of slavery in Egypt and bondage under Pharaoh. Then, as we saw last time (in verses 29-31), the author takes up the discussion of Israel’s Exodus through the sea—without any mention of Israel’s journey into the wilderness—before taking up Israel’s entrance into Canaan (the so-called Conquest) and the fall of the Canaanite city of Jericho.

We noted that the Passover and the Exodus are very closely connected—not only historically, but also theologically. The sacrificial blood of the Passover lamb spared the firstborn sons of the Israelites from the angel of death. Those who applied the sacrificial blood to their doorposts were spared. But apart from that blood, death came to all the firstborn sons of Egypt—even Pharaoh’s own. From the perspective of New Testament fulfillment, the sacrificial blood of the first Passover, pointed ahead to the death of Jesus, who is our Passover lamb. But the Passover was also the means through which Pharaoh relented and allowed the Israelites to go out into the wilderness to worship YHWH. And then God hardened

Pharaoh's heart so that he changed his mind and ordered the Egyptian army to pursue the Israelites into the sea. The consequences of this are spelled out in Hebrews 11:29. "*By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.*" Pharaoh is not only an antichrist figure, Israel's deliverance from his clutches is a graphic illustration of how the death of Jesus sets us free from the bondage of sin.

Once God's people crossed the Red Sea by faith, they entered the wilderness of the Sinai for some forty years before arriving on the plains of Moab on the outskirts of the city of Jericho—which blocked their way into Canaan. Although those whom we expect to be mentioned are not (i.e., people like Joshua and Caleb), the author of Hebrews instead mentions a Gentile prostitute (Rahab) who helped Joshua's spies hide from the king of Jericho. And so in verses 30-31, the author of Hebrews summarizes the Conquest as follows. "*By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.*" God uses Gentile sinners to rescue his people, and Rahab lived among the Israelites (as a sign of her repentance), numbered among the people of God.

With that bit of review behind us, we turn to the balance of the chapter, verses 32-40.

**W**ith that bit of review behind us, we turn to the balance of the chapter, verses 32-40. The author's concern throughout this epistle is with those in the original congregation who were Jewish converts to Christianity—many of whom had gone back to Judaism, or were considering doing so. Throughout the earlier chapters the author has made his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ to the angels, to Moses, and to Israel's priests. Jesus is the Son of God, the creator of all things, and the only redeemer. Jesus possesses an eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, and serves in the heavenly temple (to which the earthly tabernacle and temple had pointed). Throughout Hebrews 11, the author has made his case that *if* there is only one covenant promise throughout the entire Old Testament, that the saints of God believed that promise, and that this promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (a point he's made in chapters 8-10 and will make again in chapter 12), then there is no way to return to Judaism, without rejecting God's covenant promises. To return to Judaism, ironically, is to reject the God of the Old Testament.

In the earlier sections of Hebrews 11, the author offered a number of summaries of the lives of various Old Testament luminaries and their role in redemptive history. But as we come to the end of Hebrews 11, we get the sense that the author realizes that this line of argumentation could go on and on. So, he picks up the pace and even laments in verse 32, "*and what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell . . .*" The balance of the chapter reveals a staccato-like list of men from the time of the judges, the monarchy, and unnamed prophets as he brings the chapter to a close. Accordingly, it was very hard to choose an Old Testament lesson for this sermon, since so many passages and biblical episodes are alluded to here, and could be cited as texts which the author assumes that his audience knows quite well. We'll read and/or refer to a number of these texts as we go through this section of Hebrews.

We come to this list in verse 32 in which a number of names appear—again, several of those mentioned are quite surprising, as with the mention of Rahab in verse 31. These are not individuals we would expect to be singled out as those who believed the promises of God—effectively refuting the notion that individuals found in Hebrews 11 are listed primarily as examples for us to emulate. We might dare to be a Daniel, but I don't think we'd want to be a Gideon, a Samson, or a Barak—these are men of questionable character and action, but who nevertheless appear in the "hall of faith." These men are mentioned—not because they are examples for us to follow—but because they believed God's gracious promise and are justified sinners. Yet, there is one sense in which they are powerful examples to us—these are sinful

people who trust in God's promise to save them from their sins.

The list the author gives us in verse 32 is not in biblical or chronological order.<sup>1</sup> Some speculate that Samuel may be mentioned last in order to connect him to the era of the prophets. But it is probably wise not to make too much out of the order in which these names appear. The first four of these figures (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah), come from the Book of Judges. The first to be mentioned is Gideon, who is the central figure of Judges 6-8. Gideon was noteworthy for leading Israel into battle against the Midianites (a Canaanite tribe who horribly oppressed the Israelites, to the point that the Israelites were forced to flee from their land and cities and take refuge in the surrounding mountains and caves). Occupying by force the land God had promised to Israel, the Midianites decimated Israel's crops and livestock. Gideon led a small force of three hundred men, armed with torches and trumpets against them, and was able to throw the Midianite army into panic, thereby defeating a vastly superior force.

The conclusion of the battle is recounted in Judges 7:19-25. *“So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, “a sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.” So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon across the Jordan.”*

The next name on the list is that of Barak, an Israelite general who appears in Judges 4-5. Barak defeated a Canaanite army despite the Canaanites' vast military superiority in the form of iron chariots. As we read in the so-called “song” of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5), *“the kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver”* (v. 19). In other words, the Canaanites were defeated, and could take none of the traditional spoils of war—cause for rejoicing. The surprise here in Hebrews 11 is that Barak is even mentioned at all when Deborah (the fourth of Israel's judges, a prophetess, and who was far and away the most faithful of all the Judges) is not. Barak, on the other hand, refused to fight the superior Canaanites unless Deborah went into battle with him. According to the account in Judges 4:8-9, *“Barak said to [Deborah], ‘If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go.’ And she said, ‘I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera [the commander of the Canaanite army] into the hand of a woman.”* Apparently, Barak is mentioned in Hebrews 11 because he led the army of Israel to victory for YHWH's glory by faith, and not for any personal glory he might have obtained by leading Israel to victory over a vastly superior military force.

Samson is perhaps more famous than the others mentioned here, and he is the central character in Judges

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of this in; F. F. Bruce, Hebrews, 319-321.

13-16. Samson is best known for his great physical strength and for fighting against the Philistines, Israel's most dreaded foe. Yet Samson was a man who struggled mightily against the lusts of the flesh—recall the story of Delilah cutting Samson's hair, robbing him of his strength, and leaving him as a helpless object of ridicule. Yet, according to Judges 14:4, when Samson sought to marry a pagan Philistine (something his parents abhorred), we read that, "*his father and mother did not know that it was from the Lord, for he was seeking an opportunity against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines ruled over Israel.*" As we will see in the explanatory comments which follow, Samson performed many of his exploits—especially those done against the Philistines—"by faith."

Next up is Jephthah, whose tragic story is told in Judges 11-12. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute yet eventually ended up as the commander of an army (of mixed troops) which defeated the Ammonites. Jephthah is best remembered for taking a hasty vow which ended in the tragic death of his own daughter as a human sacrifice. Jephthah appeared before the king of the Ammonites, and used the occasion to express his faith in what God had done in delivering the Israelites from Egypt, thereby reminding the Ammonites that God was on Israel's side before defeating them as recounted in Judges 11:14-27.

Having mentioned these four individuals from the book of Judges, the author of Hebrews next turns to the beginning of the monarchy and to Samuel and David. David is the only one of Israel's kings who make the author of Hebrew's list. The account of David's life was well known to the Jews of the first century, as were his sins, especially his marriage to Bethsheba and his role in the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite. But David's repentance is also well-known. In 2 Samuel 12:13, we read that after his sin was exposed by Nathan the prophet, David said to Nathan, "*I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said to David, 'The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.'*" The same holds true in 2 Samuel 24:10 when David also repents of great sin.

In fact, David's last words before death are an expression of his faith in God's promise (2 Samuel 23:3-5). David confesses, "*the Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?"* David's trust in God's covenant is the same covenant promise Abraham believed, and which Moses believed. In fact, all those mentioned in Hebrews 11 believed this same promise.

The last on the list is Samuel, the son of Hannah, another significant figure in Old Testament history, and someone with whom any Jew would have been familiar. He functioned as a prophet in his youth, as a priest (even though he was not from the tribe of Levi) and then rallied the Israelites after the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant (much like the judges led Israel before the monarchy). In his famous speech in 1 Samuel 7, he declares to the Israelites, "*if you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.'* So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth, and they served the Lord only." It is during the time of Samuel that the first of the prophets arise, including Elijah and Elisha, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, who are not named in Hebrews 11, but who are mentioned as a group at the end of verse 32 (the prophets).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 322.

Having mentioned specific individuals in verse 32, the author of Hebrews now sets out a whole series of remarkable things and events associated with those on the preceding list, as well as others who are not named. The author speaks first of those these individuals, as used by God, who “*through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises [and], stopped the mouths of lions.*” The conquest of kingdoms refers to the defeat of various Canaanite tribes (the Midianites, Ammonites, and Philistines), so that by the time of the united kingdom and the rule of David, Israel’s kingdom extended all the way from the boarder with Egypt to the Euphrates river. The judges “*enforced justice,*” and God’s people were the beneficiaries of his covenant promises. Daniel (according to the account of his being in the lion’s den—Daniel 6:16-28), Samson, and David, all defeated lions.

In verse 34, we find mention of how by faith, God’s people, “*quenched the power of fire,*” (a reference to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednigo in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace as recounted in our Old Testament lesson from Daniel 3:8-30). Those who “*escaped the edge of the sword,*” is a reference to several of Israel’s well-known prophets including Elijah who was delivered from Jezebel, Elisha from Jehoram, and Jeremiah from Jehoiakim.<sup>3</sup> We read of those “*who were made strong out of weakness*” which could refer to almost any one of the judges, but no doubt, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, Samuel, and David all fit the bill here. These same men, along with several others “*became mighty in war, [and] put foreign armies to flight.*”

In verse 35, we read of “*women received back their dead by resurrection.*” Two incidents come to mind here, the first of which is Elijah, raising the widow’s son as recounted in 1 King 17:17-24. There we read, “*after this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, ‘what have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!’ And he said to her, ‘Give me your son.’ And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. And he cried to the Lord, ‘O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?’ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, ‘O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.’ And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, ‘See, your son lives.’ And the woman said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.’” A very similar thing occurs with Elisha in 2 Kings 4:17-37. Both of these events point ahead to Christ’s resurrection from the dead, and keep the idea before God’s people that the general resurrection at the end of the age, is the great event in biblical eschatology.*

In verse 35 of Hebrews 11, the author’s list goes on. “*Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.*” The fact that certain Old Testament saints looked forward to the resurrection, reminds us yet again, that the focus here falls squarely in the continuity of the covenant promise. This could refer to any number of people. In verses 36-37, we read that “*others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword.*” Jeremiah was beaten and placed in stocks (cf. Jeremiah 20:2). He was also stoned (i.e., killed with rocks), as was the prophet Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:21). As for being sawn in two, Jewish legend held that this was the eventual fate of the prophet Isaiah. Jeremiah’s fellow prophet Uriah was put to death with the sword by Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:23), and as we read in 1

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 324.

Kings 19:10, Elijah receives a word from the Lord—*“I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”*

Many of God’s people were persecuted and suffered greatly. In the last half of verse 37 and in verse 38, we read of them, *“they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”* In 2 Kings 1:8, we are told that Elijah *“wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.”* In 1 Kings 18:4, we read that *“when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.”* And if, like Abraham, the prophets looked beyond this world to the next, and through prophetic revelation directed God’s people to do likewise, then we can see how the prophets were indeed evidence of God’s grace. The ministry of these men certainly re-enforced the truth of God’s promise in the midst of a sinful world.

And so after giving us a panoramic survey of the history of the Old Testament in Hebrews 11, the author of Hebrews makes his final point in verses 39-40. *“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”* Throughout this chapter, the author’s point has been that these Old Testament saints believed the same covenant promise. Yet, the promise they believed, was still a promise—not a reality. As the author told us in the opening verse of this chapter *“faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.”* Everyone of these people believed that which God had revealed to them at that precise point in redemptive history. But the promise had not yet become a reality. Jesus had not yet come. They looked ahead, believing that God would do what he promised, and that God would keep his word.

But for us (and for those receiving this letter in the first century), God has provided something better. Jesus Christ has come and fulfilled everything promised to the saints in the Old Testament. We are participants in a new and better covenant. We now see who Jesus is—God in human flesh, the creator and sustainer of all things. Jesus is the superior high priest in a better temple, having made a final once for all sacrifice for sin. In Jesus Christ we have been made perfect, unlike the Old Testament saints who looked forward to that perfection which we, and they, now possess. God did indeed have something better for us—a new and better covenant, grounded in Christ’s death and resurrection. But all the saints mentioned in Hebrews 11, along with those countless Old Testament not mentioned, have now received every blessing which we have. “By faith” they too have entered into the fulness of Jesus Christ, just as we have. While they lived it was a promise. But now in Christ, it is a reality.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this passage?

The whole point of Hebrews 11 is that there is one covenant promise, and all those individuals mentioned here believed it—by faith, these Old Testament saints looked forward to God’s gracious covenant promise becoming a reality. That is why all those mentioned here span the entire course of Old Testament redemptive history. But what for us is a reality, was for them a promise. God had something better for us—a better covenant, a better mediator, a better temple, and the knowledge that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been made perfect.

Everything for which these saints hoped, we have. Everything they desired, is for us a reality. That for which they longed, we struggle not to take for granted. The difference between them and us, is the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, that one in whom all of God’s promises are fulfilled.