

Perseverance, Not Perfection

Hebrews 11:1-12:3 (selected verses)
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time; August 8, 2010
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As we begin our reflection on Hebrews 11, I want to ask you to think about who some of your heroes are. CNN is conducting a survey on heroes on their website, and you can go online and describe who some of your heroes are and why. It made me think back to who some of my heroes have been and why.

When I was growing up, most of my heroes came from the world of sports, and, like a lot of guys, I had posters of my heroes on my wall. As a basketball fan in Memphis, of course I had posters of the Memphis Tigers on my wall. I still have the poster of the 1981-82 Memphis Tigers: that was Keith Lee's freshman year. There is Keith Lee, with Doom Haynes, Bobby Parks, and the rest.

I've watched with great nostalgia as Whitey Herzog was inducted in the Baseball Hall of Fame. The Cardinals retired his number, and at the ceremony last Saturday night sat several of the players of the 1985 National League Champions. I had a poster of one of them on my wall: the greatest defensive shortstop of all time: the Wizard, Ozzie Smith. He earned 13 Golden Gloves, and he is first on the all-time list of career assists for outs.

There are some legendary stories about Ozzie Smith's practice routine. Everyday in the off-season, he would have a coach hit a thousand balls off of a fun-go bat toward him at shortstop. And then he would say, "Hit them a little more to the left," so that he would have to stretch out to make a more difficult play. He would practice high chops, bad hops, and line drives. He practiced, practiced, and practiced to get better and better. He still made errors from time to time, but he was relentless in his practice routine.

I've been intrigued lately by another hero from the world of 1980's sports: Manute Bol. Perhaps you saw his obituary in the paper a few weeks ago. He died in June at the age of 47. Manute Bol was born in the Sudan, and he played in the NBA for ten seasons, and he was more of a comic figure than anything else. He was 7 feet 6 inches tall, which is really good if you play basketball. His problem was that he weighed only 225 pounds, which is really bad if you're an NBA center — you get pushed around all over the court.

Manute Bol was devout Christian, and he grieved over the suffering of his Sudnaese people, especially children. So, he gave away most of the millions he received as player. He then worked to raise awareness and raise money to build schools and hospitals. His main purpose was to help reconcile enemies between northern and southern Sudan. He was relentless in bringing enemies together face to face where he talked about forgiveness. And then, partly due to his mission work in impoverished areas, he contracted a skin disease that became infected, and he died from it

earlier this summer. What a heroic life he ended up living! Not as an athlete in our star-crazy culture, but heroic as a Christian in a hurting world. He would qualify as a hero.

Manute Bol is like those in this intriguing list of people in Hebrews who live by faith. Faith is the driving force in their lives, and New Testament scholar and preacher Tom Long calls this list the Old Testament Heroes Hall of fame. Did you hear the names of those listed who live by faith? Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David — just to name a few. There are others named also whose stories are very important, even if they are not as well known as these: Enoch, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. They are all trotted out on display in the book of Hebrews.

Until about a year ago, I never really spent much time in the Book of Hebrews. In proportion to the earlier books of the New Testament, especially the gospels, I just never concentrated much on the message of Hebrews. That changed this time last year as I began to teach New Testament to college students, and we began to look in depth at this fairly long book toward the end of the NT. I rediscovered just how important this book was in the life of the early Christian church, and just how important Hebrews is for us today.

This letter that circulated among the first churches is important for several reasons. One is that it's actually not so much a letter as it is a short theological treatise, a sermon, a statement of faith geared toward the ears of highly educated Christians with Jewish backgrounds — hence the name "Hebrews". It is written in better and more elegant Greek than nearly every other NT book. Its description of who Jesus is, its Christology, is very complex, and it alludes to many aspects of Jewish theology in the Old Testament.

It's fascinating then, that Hebrews, as well-written and as theologically structured as it is, also contains some huge unknowns. Except for that introduction of "to the Hebrews", we don't know anything about to whom it was written. Other documents we know were written to the Corinthians, the churches in Galatia, or the Philippians. Some scholars say that Hebrews might have been written to Jewish Christians in Rome at some time between 65-85 AD, but the truth is that we don't know those details for sure.

Even more of a mystery is who the writer of Hebrews was. At first some people attributed it to Paul. Others early on realized that the vocabulary and writing style and themes were way too different from Paul's letters to say he was the writer. One early church theologian suggested Paul's traveling companion, Barnabus, was the author. Martin Luther speculated that an early church evangelist named Apollos wrote it. In the end, everyone seems to agree with the early church theologian Origen, who said, "Who wrote the letter to the Hebrews? Only God knows."

So the NT hands down to us this anonymous letter written to an unknown audience — and yet its message is crucially important, especially here toward the end.

Chapter 11 starts with this classic definition of faith: Hebrews 11:1. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It's hard to catch the significance and meaning of this phrase, "the conviction of things not seen." Another translation reads, "faith is being certain of what we do not see." Another says, "being sure of unseen realities."

Part of the Biblical world-view about reality around us — about the world in which we live is that it contains two parts: what is seen and known, on the one hand, and what is invisible, or unseen, yet nevertheless just as real. There is the physical world, that can be measured by sight and observation, and there is the non-physical, spiritual part to the reality that cannot be seen, but can still be experienced, and tapped into and believed.

In the physical world, we live by sight and sound and touch. One of the classes I teach is on the relationship between science and theology, and there are some phenomenal scientists who are Christians, like Francis Collins and others like Nancy Murphey, who leading this conversation right now. We talk about the scientific method, and how through science we measure and record data, and we observe the physical world around us. The scientific method provides great insight into the physical world God created, and it leads to one way of experiencing and describing the world. But it's not the only way. There is another aspect to our experience in the world around us in which we, as 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, "live by faith, and not by sight." Jesus talks about this in a way with doubting Thomas when he says, "You have seen and believe. Blessed are they who have not seen, yet believe."

There are unseen realities around us that you can believe in, even if you can't see but are very present. God. Heaven. The Holy Spirit. A "great cloud of witnesses"; spiritual realities that you can't feel with your hands, but you can with your heart: Love. Hope. Devotion. Forgiveness. You can't see these things, but they are very much part of our reality.

Somewhere tucked away in my gray matter I have a memory of memorizing this verse in an Idlewild Sunday School class at three decades ago. I can picture my Sunday school teacher's face as she lead our class in learning this verse: Margaret Houts, who died just a few months ago and joined the great cloud of witnesses. Never doubt or take casually what you teach a ten year old, because it might stick with him for the rest of his life: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

The second and third generation Christians to whom this letter was written had never seen Jesus. The original followers who knew Jesus by sight, face to face, were fewer and fewer, and living by faith rather than sight was more and more important.

And then, as if to underline this definition with concrete examples, the writer goes on to list person after person after person, for whom faith in God was the guiding force of their life. Just about every clause begins with the words, "by faith." By faith Abel offered God his sacrifice; by faith Noah built an ark, by faith Isaac blessed his descendents, and by faith Joseph. By faith Moses, by faith Rahab, by faith Gideon; by faith Samson; Jephthah; by faith David. By faith, by faith, by faith, all of these people lived — by faith as the guiding force in their lives.

For example, verse 8:

"By faith Abraham, when called...., obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

This is one of the great truths about Abraham's life after God encountered him and called him into a relationship. God called and Abraham went, even though he did not know where he was going. God promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son, and this promise propelled them into the future. Abraham had no idea that God was going to lead he and Sarah on a journey through Egypt and into many dangers. Abraham had no idea that he would have to fight against surrounding tribes in order to free his nephew Lot who was taken captive. He did not know that this same nephew would turn greedy with the family business and demand a painful financial split and separation from his uncle. Abraham couldn't have known that God would have him wait decades until Isaac was born. He also couldn't have known that his own faith would be put to the ultimate test when God demanded more of him than most of us could imagine. Surely, it is an apt description of Abraham's faith in God that when he was called, he obeyed and went, even though he had no idea where he was going...

And, honestly, neither do you or I.

A couple of weeks ago, I ran into an old friend who is a Christian grew up in a tiny little place called Saxapahaw, North Carolina. Now she lives in Philadelphia, and I asked her how somebody gets from Saxapahaw to Philadelphia, and she said, "Lord only knows."

Last Sunday Anne [Apple] mentioned from this pulpit the happy news of remembering that Steve has been the pastor here at Idlewild for ten years. Think about where you were ten years ago and all of the changes that have occurred in your life in the last decade. How did you get from there to here? Could you have imagined ten years ago how your life would have unfolded from then to now? Lord only knows, and so we walk by faith and not by sight.

In June, we went back to visit the town in Scotland where we lived in the late 90s. It was ten years ago this summer that we moved home, and we had such a great time catching up with people we hadn't seen in a decade.

One person we were close to was Alan Miller, who served with me as an Associate Pastor at our church, St. Michael's. Alan and his wife Lucy became good friends, and we had our first children within a couple of years of each other, and we spent a lot of time together. About a year after our moving home, out of the blue, Alan was diagnosed with an insidious form of leukemia, and Lucy was expecting their second child. The treatments were excruciating, and Alan got really sick. That child was born when Alan was at his lowest, and on one, including his own doctors, expected him to live long enough to even meet his second son. But he did, somehow, he did. And he recovered and has gone on to continue his walk with God through life, even though he has no idea where he is going.

That's the way life is, even when you live by faith. Because the future is unknown, and faith is about things you hope for but cannot see, you will never know where God will lead you on your journey of faith. Honestly, in your heart of hearts, you know that you don't know what's coming next.

And for some people, that fact alone is too much to handle. It's enough to make them want to give up and live hopelessly and helplessly and selfishly. Things happen, circumstances change,

hardships arise, mistakes are made, money is made and lost, suffering occurs, marriages break up; illnesses afflict, children go astray, burdens weigh us down: and so some people, in the midst of living by faith, are tempted to quit. To give up. To let go of faith as the guiding force in their life.

This temptation to give up and let go appears to be the *main problem* addressed by the writer of Hebrews.

The writer of Hebrews gives this classic definition of faith and then he mentions all of these faithful people from the past because he needs to remind Christians in the present how essential it is to persevere and keep walking with God. Hebrews was written after the first wave of Christianity had swept across the Mediterranean world. It was written to strengthen the faith of a group of people who saw others around them giving up, and letting go and fading away. The writer of Hebrews is watching people drop out, and so he writes this letter and included passages like:

10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.

10:36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

10:39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

And then after this long list of faithful heroes from the OT:

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. 2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful people, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This letter is written to those who are tempted to grow weary and lose heart. Running a race is hard, and Christianity is not a sprint: it's marathon; and things happen along the way to make people want to stop running their race of faith and stop walking with God and just stop.

And so there is something about this list of faithful heroes and their relationships with God. Nowhere does it say that they are heroes because they are perfect; or because they pray all the time; or because they say the right things, or support the temple. Nowhere do we find them always making the right choices and doing the right things. No, in fact sometimes it's just the opposite.

There is no small amount of irony in this list of the faithful from the OT. They are commended for living by faith, and so they did. But when you go back and read the details of their lives, you

see that in the midst of living faithfully, their lives were a mixture of good and bad; of faith and sin.

There's Noah who was so faithful he built an ark; and there's Noah, who drank too much and brought shame to his family.

Abraham and Sarah believed and trusted God, and they longed for a new life in the form of a son...and they waited and longed and yearned year after year. In the meantime, they made some bad mistakes — like leaving Hagar and Ishmael out in the desert to die.

It mentions Jacob, who was estranged from his own brother to the point of violence over family land and their inheritance.

There is Joseph, who was a good man and who did the right thing and nevertheless suffered because of the sins of others.

Rahab was a complete stranger to God and sold herself to the highest bidder; until she showed courage and hospitality and faith.

God called Gideon to be a leader of his people, but Gideon balked — not once, not twice, but three times.

Samson used his strength to slaughter Philistines by the dozen, but it wasn't until he was totally helpless that he finally learned to rely on the power of God.

Jephthah was rash and impulsive and momentarily very thoughtless, and it cost his daughter her life.

David, the great king. Truly admirable writer of so many Psalms, yet David's personal life and indeed his entire reign as king was thwarted by his lustful lapse in judgment and his subsequent cover up.

There all there in the Faithful Heroes Hall of Fame.

Do they remind you of anyone? These people who lived by faith and not by sight, do they sound familiar in their actions and attributes?

These ones who longed for God's promises to come true year after year?

Those who make bad mistakes, and those who sometimes shame their families?

These ones who want God to prove himself before they will follow, again and again?

Those who have lustful lapses in judgment and then try to cover up.

Those who were estranged from family members over money.

Those who do right and nevertheless suffer from others' sins.

Those who think they are strong but who won't know God until they are made helpless.

Those who make rash judgments and foolish statements that prove costly.

Do these people remind you of anyone?

They remind me of ... me, and you, and all of us who are human. You see these heroes in faith are not heroes because they were perfect — far from it. They are heroes in faith because they desire to follow God and they persevere and did not give up. They yearn for God, and despite their set-backs and sins and faults, they nevertheless take another step, sometimes a leap of faith. They live by faith and not by sight, and they keep going.

And so should you, and so should I. It may be that you are at a point in your life where you feel this letter to the Hebrews was also written for you. You need to be strengthened in your faith and encouraged to keep going because you're not sure how you can or if you want to continue. You may not be there today, but odds are you've been there before and likely will be again. Most people need to hear its message at some point or another because...circumstances change. Relationships have not worked out like you had hoped, you've been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, you're carrying around a burden you have no idea how to let go of, and you are in a point in your walk with God where you feel like stopping.

And so Hebrews was written for you as well, and the perfect advice to the early church through Hebrews back in their day is the same perfect advice for us in our day. Fix your eyes upon Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Fix your eyes upon Jesus and remember him and his ways and his presence in your life. Fix your eyes upon Jesus, which is also to allow him to fix his eyes upon you. Look into those eyes of warmth and welcome; see his gaze compassion and comfort.

Look into the eyes of Jesus, and remember his endurance and perseverance, especially of the cross. Look into those strengthening and healing eyes of Jesus, and take one more step forward, and live one more day by faith; take one more step into unknown realities, and God will take one, two, and more steps back toward you. Live by faith for one more day, and see if you don't have a whole cloud of witnesses cheering you on.

God has never asked us to be perfect, only to persevere as we live by faith. It is an heroic way to live.

Amen.

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