

GOD HAS CALLED US TO FAITHFULNESS

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Abstract: All Christian workers want to be successful in their efforts. Some, though, like Jeremiah, may not see their ministries flourish in terms of numbers and other trappings of secular success. This lecture will remind us that God wants us to be faithful even when others might not judge us as "successful."

Scripture Readings: Heb. 11:24-28; Jeremiah 20:7-9

I am a preacher. I have always seen myself as a preacher. I still have trouble seeing myself as a professor. Do not always take direct route—my thoughts and my sermons are at times filled with detours.

So first of all, I want to admit that I feel guilty. Guilty because I struggle with priorities. How do I answer God's call? So many needs in our world. Hurts, struggles, genocide, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo, wars, uncertainties. And sometimes the answer seems so easy--\$16K here, a couple of thousand there... So I struggle, how can I best minister in this broken world? How can we begin to solve the problems?

To provide a beginning point for our conversation I want to recall the text from Jeremiah 20 and observe that the desire to serve faithfully is not a new challenge. It is an old refrain, always before those who serve as missionaries and ministers, and also others of God's people. Then I want to point us to a NT text that is a "faithfulness" text, perhaps not in an obvious way, not directly but indirectly. I want to visit a text that runs like a refrain through the book of Hebrews. The author is summarizing, concluding. A little text follows, but this summarizes. Heb 12:1ff.

"Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." This provides one last glance over the shoulder to a list of people of faith that were forefathers--in heritage and in faith--of those reading this writing. These were people who answered the call of God in their lives. These people of faith are also our heritage. In the Hall of Faith in chapter 11 we have been reminded of Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Isaac, Moses, Rahab...on and on. All living lives by faith before God. All faithful, if you will.

As a preacher, I marvel at restraint required not to preach a little sermon on each of these. Shouldn't we be strong like Samson? Should we be willing to give up everything like Abraham, etc. etc. But here is an important point for preachers/missionaries. It is not always inspiring to parade before an audience the great superheroes of faith. In fact, it may be depressing. Faithful people do not always see their ministries flourish. Faithful Christians do not always meet success by worldly standards, or by our own standards. It is not always easy to see God's hand at work in our lives, and precisely at those points we are most tempted to give up or change direction.

As a preacher, I am also amazed at those who are absent the list. Some of the great heroes of faith are not mentioned, and we could learn much had we time to think about those individuals. The point is that however much we may think of some OT personages as faithful, they don't make the list in Hebrews 11. There will always be Christians who are successful in God's sight who do not receive the applause and accolades of the world. Howard Norton reminded me recently of the response given by Dr. Raymond Kelcy when a student asked who might be the greatest preacher in the brotherhood. "Someone we don't know who is preaching faithfully in a place we don't know."

All of this means we have to be very cautious as we encourage one another. Listen to a typical sermon, the illustrations are Peter and Paul, or missionaries who endangered their lives, had feet frozen off in arctic or bodies shriveled in equatorial heat. These are the examples of our sermons. We in the US are tempted to forget, at least we are not frequently reminded, that much of the work God needs done in the world is done by those who are heroic for their perseverance, their ability to work without becoming well-known. This is perhaps a weakness of our thinking about missions. We sit in church, listen to these stories about the great superheroes, super-missionaries, the preacher throws in a couple of good Alexander the Great or Napoleon stories, and what are our kids thinking? What are our adults thinking? It's too bad you can't be a Christian like that in Macksville, Kansas! It is indeed a shame that in my little town, no one is chasing, imprisoning, or killing Christians. So the kids are not challenged to go forth, and the parents hear the stories of danger, imprisonment, and death, and they are more certain than ever that they don't want their kids going to the mission field.

All of this talk about faithfulness reminds me of summer camps. You remember the inspiring, candlelight nights of consecration, we would light candles around the circle, "I am committed." I can give my life, I will give my life. I did not know how I would give my life. Dreams were of rescuing someone, perhaps I would drown, or die as missionary, in a foreign land, under persecution.

I was sincere, have been through sincere now through almost ½ century of Christianity, more than that counting my younger years, through 37 years now of full-time preaching. I like to call it 5 decades--60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, present decade, whatever we call it—the zeros, the preteens. I will give my life, but no one warned me that it would not happen as I imagined. In battle, in war, men and women "give their lives." But most of us do not give our lives that way--rather we give our lives a little at a time, a day at a time, an event here, years of little things, one speaker calls them little checks--45c, 1.82, 2.03, 26c... Our lives are nibbled away. Lives of drinking a sip here, sip there. But lives of faithfulness. You one day retire. Did you notice, did anyone notice...that you gave your life, drank the cup, paid the price? That you were faithful.

Now these heroes were not perfect. Some preachers like that kind of preaching--point out the flaws of others, take the great characters of the Bible and our time and point out the flaws, the feet of clay. Abraham lied about his wife, Jacob cheated his brother, Rachel took the old idols along just in case. When we preach such sermons everyone feels good. "Well, everyone has their problems." We're only human.

But that is not the purpose of Hebrews. The writer says these great people of faith lived their lives with trust in God, they endured, he suggests they were faithful. In the book of Hebrews, faithful is not a word applied to God's people. Yes, they were people of faith, but the first point to be made is that God is faithful.

- *Hebrews 2:17: For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.*
- *Hebrews 3:2: He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house.*
- *Hebrews 3:5: Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future.*
- *Hebrews 3:6: But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.*
- *Hebrews 8:9: It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.*
- *Hebrews 10:23: Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*
- *Hebrews 11:11: By faith Abraham, even though he was past age-and Sarah herself was barren-was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.*

Now these in Hebrews were those who shared the heavenly calling (3:1), they are God's house—holding on with courage and hope, they are brothers (10:19), they are hopeful, persevering, encouragers, recipients of the light, insulted, persecuted, confident, not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who believe and are saved. And then we get in Hebrews 11 the wonderful examples we know. Which brings us back to our text. They are the cloud of witnesses, but we should turn attention to you and to me as we think about what this lesson really means to us.

These OT heroes are what Joyce Landorf has labeled the balcony people. They are in the balcony, cheering us on, pulling us up, reminding us that the task is possible, the obstacles surmountable. But as these cheer us on in our race, we are reminded that it is now our time. The mantle has fallen to us. These have continued on despite the odds and obstacles, and now the fatigue, the danger of falling, the difficulties are upon you and me.

Thus we are introduced to our assignment if we are to be faithful also--casting off, getting rid of, shedding every impediment, every hindrance, every burden, every sin that clings too closely. Get rid of that so you can run. This is a race. Get rid of everything that holds you back. Easy to say, difficult to do. Because we love some of those things, relationships, pains, habits, this is difficult to do. But bigger problem arises when we do not know what they are.

So capable are we at self-deception. Illus: preacher in church, problem comes, preacher knows problem, IDs persons causing problem, continues working, prays "Lord remove the problem." A

few months later he is gone. Preoccupied all that time with the wrong thing. It is not easy to lay aside the hindrance and run with endurance.

I would like to use another word to encourage you to faithfulness. Endurance is a tough word. Perseverance is no better. Some translate patience, but that's not what it really is. It is endurance, stick-to-it-tiveness, staying in there. Wish I could spruce it up, but it's get up and go, every day, day after day. You know of wonderful times when what we want to do and have to do are the same. Blissful, but most of time what we want to do and what we have to do, do not coincide, and that's endurance.

Especially problematic in a culture and world enamored with feeling. How did you feel about it? Well, I didn't feel like it. Why weren't you there? I didn't feel like it. At OVC, I passed out scripture texts for students in class to preach. Students look at the text received, flip through the Bible, read the text, then they come to ask, "Can I have another one?" "What's wrong with that one?" Well, I read it and didn't feel anything. Well, take it home and get to feeling something because that is assignment.

I remember first time an eldership asked me to preach on a specific text. I was terrified. I still am. How do you preach on a text? I'd been to school 4 years, graduated, and had a degree in Bible. I remember my first PAL in Quito, Ecuador. I didn't even know what PAL was, and I got a text, and I think I spoke on the text, but I'm not sure I preached on that text so that those present heard the text. Many preachers are not enduring, taking the easy way out, preaching on whatever they feel like, not on what church needs to hear, not on what God wants to say. I see it often in our Bible classes. We take the easy way out—we pretend to be studying a particular book of the Bible, but we really just use it as a springboard to say whatever we want to say, and to repeat what we have always said. Many people want the reward first, want always to feel good.

But what makes world go around, what makes church work, what makes missions work, what keeps everything going is endurance. Jan rushes around, cleans house, it looks great, weekend before lectureship. I ask her why? She says, "Every time I see a vacuum, I get that feeling, I am moved, I am thrilled." No. She says, you invited company for lectureship, I don't want them to see house like this, get out of the way.

A professor grades papers late, or is back in the office, or the preacher at building on day off, why. Not about racing pulse and throbbing heart. Grades are due on a certain day. I cannot leave campus until I turn them in. It is as simple as that. Preachers preach sermons with heavy hearts--daughter in trouble, son expelled, accidents, problems. Mission work is filled with problems. The preacher goes to the pulpit, temples pounding, preaches the gospel. Why? Because it is 11:00, it is Sunday, and I'm the preacher here.

I remember an event from our past: 7:15 Sun p.m. Jan, can you drive home. Understand, she never drives, I always drive. I get home, temp is 104. I didn't know I was so sick.

Endurance makes the world go round. Run with endurance, looking to Jesus. It is far easier to look around, easier to look at everything else. All interested in marketing, what is popular, what do people want? We want to measure our success by baptisms, by outward measurements, and we must stop it, especially in the relationship between supporting churches and their missionaries. World of diff between what people think they want and what they need. Looking to Jesus.

This does not just mean going around bragging on Jesus, saying wonderful things about God, Christ, King, Master, this-that. Not using name of Jesus to endorse political or personal agendas. Not a name to pronounce in polite places. When some find Jesus, they start mentioning him often, but lives are no different. Looking to Jesus. What does that mean? He is the model, the pioneer, the trailblazer, the forerunner. He is the faithful one, and can be somehow faithful only if we keep our eyes on him. To use Bob and faithful in the same sentence is an oxymoron. So this is how we live if we understand and live out the book of Hebrews.

Do you know this Jesus? How do you communicate this superior Jesus? They bring him a leper, he touches him. They bring him babies--crying, wetting, dropping pacifiers. Disciples said, Get those kids out of here, we're trying to have kingdom here. Take them to junior kingdom. Jesus said, let them come, this is kingdom. He feeds multitudes, is compassionate to hungry, eats with sinners, with rich, with poor. He loves, he cares, he gives himself. He weeps over sin. He is ultimately hanged on the cross for us. This looking to Jesus is right here, very hard. But this is the gospel description of the Jesus who was faithful.

Frankly, he doesn't look like Messiah...but then listen to the text of Hebrews: "who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despised the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of God."

When we look to Jesus, we have to make majestic flip-flop. To answer the holy calling means a whole host of things we have never considered. This character of God, son of God disappoints. The Jews thought where Messiah is there will be no problems, now have to see the opposite. It is precisely where we struggle--when we disappoint ourselves, when we want to quit, when we do quit, when we see our own sinful struggle--that Jesus is there, witnesses are cheering us on, there is his example, there is his way opening before us. This is life-changing faith in Christ, not just in his life, but in life of the church.

How can we imitate the Hebrews kind of faithfulness in our kind of world? Throw aside the hindrances, run the race with patience, look to Jesus constantly, and follow his example. Live faithfully, love all generously, support others compassionately, speak truthfully, pray daily, and leave everything else to God! Do not quit. Do not worry that outward success is not attainable. God has not called us to success, but to a holy life dedicated to his service. Living that holy life is what the Bible calls faithfulness. That is the message of this text: we take it to the world most effectively when we live it out in our daily lives.