

Heroes of Faith (Hebrews 11:1-16)

What super power do we need to persevere as Christians, even when there is pressure to give up? Faith! This was the super power of the heroes of the Old Testament according to the writer of Hebrews.

Heroes:

Super Heroes

Super heroes are really popular with people today. The Marvel film franchise has been incredibly successful in recent years with super heroes as diverse as Spiderman, who can climb up walls to ant man who can reduce his size to an ant. From Captain America, with his amazing discus shield to Thor with his all-powerful hammer and from Captain Marvel, an American astronaut who gains the ability to fly and superhuman strength to the Black Widow a former Russian spy with enhanced powers due to a super-soldier serum.

The list of fantasy superheroes is endless, we cannot get enough of them, perhaps because they are relatable as normal human beings like you and me, yet are somehow take us out of the hum drum realities of day to day life.

Historic Heroes

Yet, there are also real heroes. Historical or present figures that inspire us with their extraordinary achievements or qualities. We can look back to great leaders like Churchill or military leaders like Nelson. We can admire the grit and determination of sporting heroes like the Lionesses, the England women's football team that won the Euros last Sunday.

These kind of heroes can inspire us and set us examples to follow. Indeed, the Lionesses will no doubt inspire many young girls to take up football in the coming years.

Heroes of Faith

In our reading from Hebrews today, the writer begins a list of great Biblical heroes. They too are there to inspire us, to encourage us to follow their example, but in a sense they also have a superpower that points us beyond our everyday lives to something far greater. They are heroes because of their faith and the writer wants us to like them have a faith that endures.

The Importance of Faith

As you read through the whole of Hebrews, you pick up that one of the writers main concerns is to encourage the readers to hold on to faith.

Early on he says:

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God." (Hebrews 3:12)

Through the heart of Hebrews he is seeking to show, probably Christians who had converted from Judaism, that following Jesus was indeed the better way, because Jesus offers a better salvation that the old ways of Judaism were only meant to point forward to.

And what are they to do because of this, Bruce showed us last week from Hebrews 10:

- Draw near to God
- Hold on to God
- Spur one another on

The call to 'hold on' perhaps picks up the writer's main concern. As we go on in chapter 10, he provides warnings about the dangers of giving up and encouragements to keep on making the sacrifices that being a Christian entails.

Yet, it was hard to hold on for the Jewish Christians then and it is hard to hold on as a Christian today:

In today's world to be a Christian may mean that others think us weird, odd or just simply wrong. We can lose the approval of others and face criticism for our beliefs. When this happens we can feel the pressure to give up.

In today's world we are bombarded with lots of conflicting and contradictory messages and we no longer know who we can trust. In such a setting it is easy to stop trusting in God's word and give up on faith.

In today's world to be a Christian can feel like you are in a minority, different and distinctive from those around you, almost like a refugee in your own home. You can feel the pressure to give up on God and make the world your home.

So, how can we hold on? The answer is that we need the super power of faith.

Faith, the Super Power (11:1-2)

The writer ends chapter 10 by saying:

"We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved." (Hebrews 10:39)

It is faith that stops us shrinking back and helps us hold on to be saved.

One of Superman's powers is that he can see through walls, he has a kind of x-ray vision.

In a similar way, faith's super power is to help us to see beyond our immediate situation.

Hebrews 11:1 says:

" Now faith is being sure of what we hope for
and certain of what we do not see."

Faith takes us beyond the present to the promises God has made for us in the future, it takes us beyond our immediate struggles and fears to the God who is in control. Faith enables us to see beyond and in doing so to be able to behave and act differently. In particular it enables us to see beyond the pressures of today's world to the God who is there for us and has a brighter future prepared for us.

This is what the heroes of the Old Testament were commended for. They are to be our example to follow and live by. So, let's dive in and see what he says about them.

***Faith sees beyond the world's approval to the approval of God**

The heroes of faith were commended by God, because of their faith! Their focus was not on the approval of the people around them, but on wanting to live to please God.

The three characters first mentioned are from the early chapters of Genesis. Abel was Adam's son along with his brother Cain. Enoch is a more obscure character and Noah is probably the best known of the three!

Abel (11:4)

So, Abel by faith offered a better sacrifice than Cain. He wanted to give the best to God and was not afraid of upsetting his brother. Yet, Cain out of jealousy killed Abel. Abel became the first martyr, but his word and his example endures because of his faith.

Enoch (11:5-6)

Enoch was so keen to please God, that he did not even die. God just took him away from the world to be with him! Why did Enoch please God? Because he had faith both that God was real, but also that God rewards those who truly seek him. Fundamentally, because of these basic beliefs in the character of God, Enoch lived to please him. The rest of the Bible and the coming of Jesus underline these truths about God far more powerfully, how can we not have the same faith as Enoch and want to live to please God?

Noah (11:7)

Whereas Enoch believed God existed and rewarded those who sought him, Noah believed the flip side of this, that God will act in judgement on those who continue in rejecting him. So, he obeyed God's warning about the judgement and so saved himself and his family by building an ark and being rescued from the flood. In so doing he had to reject the attitudes and outlook of the people around him and follow the path God had put out for him and so in a way condemned the world. No doubt the world of his day would not have approved of this condemnation, but Noah lived by faith and looked beyond their approval to God's.

- **Application: From whom do you gain approval?**

So, one test of the reality of our faith is to ask the question:

- 'From whom do you gain approval?'

There are different groups we can look to for approval:

- Friends or followers on social media
- Colleagues at work
- Old friends
- Parents or grandparents
- Our children
- Husband, wife or girlfriend or boyfriend
- God

Most of the time these groups will approve of most of the things we do. The crunch comes, when we have to choose between a behaviour or action that one group approves of and another does not. Whose approval do we most value then?

If we truly believe God exists, that he is the ruler and judge of the universe who rewards those who seek him, then surely we will choose to value God's approval above all others.

We will want to act as God wants even if it risks the disapproval of others who matter to us. That can be hard, but that is what faith enables us to do.

Faith sees beyond today's world to the word of God

So, faith sees beyond the world's approval to God's approval, but it also sees beyond today's world to the word of God.

Creation (11:3)

The idea of the word of God is actually introduced first, in verse 3, when the writer starts with Creation. The faith he talks about here is the kind of faith shared by Jews and Christians, but which marked them out as different from Greek thought.

Greeks believed that the basic matter of the universe has always existed, but that god had shaped the matter to create the world we now live in. The Jewish faith, however, had a distinct view, that God is the one that has always existed and created the universe from nothing.

How did they believe that? By faith! They believed the word of God about this in the Holy Scriptures. For Jewish Christians, the idea of faith that God can bring something out of nothing by his word is a fundamental concept they have grown up with. They know that God can bring about what at present is unimaginable by his word.

Noah understood this when he heard the word of warning about the flood. Although there was no sign of a flood, he built the ark, trusting in God's word despite the reality of his own world and God's word proved true.

Abraham (11:8, 11-12)

Similarly, Abraham acted out of trust in God's word, even though the present reality showed no indication that what God was saying could be true.

So, God told Abraham to leave his home to receive an inheritance, even though the reality of leaving everything you know must have felt very risky and Abraham did not even know what the inheritance was that God was promising, he trusted in God's word.

Similarly, to Abraham and his wife Sarah it seemed impossible that they could ever have a child, because she had never been able to have children and they were both old and passed it. Yet, God's word proved true and they had Isaac in fulfilment of God's promise.

Why did Abraham have such faith? Because he trusted that God is faithful. In encountering living God, Abraham trusted that what God said would always prove true, even if the reality of his present world seemed to suggest otherwise.

• **Application: Whose word do you trust?**

So, whose word do you trust? Whose word will you allow to guide you in life?

Again there are different sources we look to for guidance in life:

- Friends and family
- Teachers or bosses
- Google searches
- Newspapers
- TV
- Books
- The Bible

Much of the time their advice won't contradict or conflict with each other. Yet sometimes they will. When that happens, which will you listen to? Which will you believe?

If you have encountered the living God revealed by Jesus and have faith in him, and believe that he is faithful, then surely you have to trust, his word, the Bible as the most trustworthy guide, even if it conflicts with what everyone else is saying.

This is what it means to live by faith.

Faith sees beyond the problematic present to the better future of God

Faith then, trusts the word of God, but for Abraham that word was mainly promise, and for us a lot of the good news of God is about promise, promise of eternal life. It points beyond our problematic word to the better future of God, it offers us hope we can be confident in.

Abraham (11:9-10)

Abraham followed God and moved to the promised land. Yet, at that time it was not his land. He was literally a foreigner or a migrant there. So much so that he lived in tents rather than having a settled house.

Yet, Abraham's faith saw beyond the problems of his present existence to the better future that God was promising. He saw beyond his own death to the ultimate hope that God was holding out. He saw beyond his existence in tents to the city that God himself would build and provide.

Welcoming from a distance (11:13-16)

Indeed, this looking for a better future was what all of these heroes of faith were commended for. Faith is not about having the best life now, but in welcoming with joy the hope of a much better life to come.

When it becomes difficult to be a Christian it does not give up and go back to the old ways, which may have been a bit better, but pushes on and holds on for the better future that God promises. Faith sees the heavenly country that God promises as our true home!

- **Application: Where is your home?**

Again this raises a question. Where do you call home? Home is the place where we can feel most comfortable and relaxed.

Yet, as Christians we should not be surprised if living for God, can be uncomfortable. At times we will brush up against people that disagree with us, face the disappointment of those we love not holding on to the faith or coming to faith, feel the pressure to behave in ways that dishonour God and find that the truth of God's word has been drowned out by the multitude of other seemingly more entertaining voices.

As a Christian this world may well not feel like home, but that is because our true home, our much better home is yet to come. Faith sees that better future and welcomes it, because it knows that no matter how good or bad the present is, God's planned future for us is far better!

Faith sees beyond...

So, have you got the super power that the heroes of the Old Testament had. Have you the faith that sees beyond this present world to seek the approval of God, to trust the word of God and long for our home with God?

Will you hold on to faith?

Are you a hero or a zero?