ALL COMMENED FOR THEIR FAITH

Hebrews 11:29-40
Key Verse: 11:39 “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.’

 In the two previous lessons we studied the heroes of faith who pleased God such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, the Patriarch, and Moses. Especially through the stories of Abraham and Moses we learned how to trust in God and depend on him in all situations. They chose God rather than the things of the world. They sought God and his righteousness first. They became two great trees of faith in the OT. In today’s passage we will study about more men of faith in the OT who pleased God through their faith. We don’t have time to talk about all of them, but some chosen events and figures, who encourage us to live by faith like them.

First, by faith the people of God crossed the Red Sea (29) Look at verse 29. "***By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.***" The story of crossing the Red Sea is written in the book of Exodus 13-14. At that time the Israelites were being chased by King Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies. The Israelites arrived at the Red Sea. They were stuck between the Egyptian army's rear and the Red Sea front. They had to choose between surrendering to King Pharaoh and jumping into the Red Sea. But at that time, Moses planted faith in their hearts. In Exodus 14:13-14 Moses said to the Israelites, "*Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only be silent*." The Israelites were strengthened by Moses' faith and his word. So, by faith they crossed the Red Sea as Moses had commanded. Exodus 14:22 describes this, "*and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.*" King Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies were frightened by this supernatural phenomenon. So, they had to submit to the God of Israel and return to their country. But they tried to cross the Red Sea like the Israelites and all of them were drowned when the water flowed back over them. (Ex 14:26) The Israelites passed through the Red Sea by faith and were saved. The Egyptians tried the same by fortune and were drowned.

 When we live in this world, we confront impossible situations like crossing the Red Sea. Some are stuck between two large obstacles such as the Egyptian armies and the Red Sea. What should we do in this seemingly impossible situation? We cannot go back to Egypt or jump into the Red Sea. This is the time for us to make a decision of faith. This is the time for us to hear Moses' message. "Don't be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today... The LORD will fight for you; you need only be silent." Then, we put our foot on the Red Sea by faith. I believe those who do so by faith will cross the Red Sea as on dry land. Those who trust in God and obey God's word will overcome their impossible situation. Remember that what is impossible with men is possible with God. All things are possible with God. Amen!

Second, by faith the walls of Jericho fell. (30) Look at verse 30. "***By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days***." This story is written in the book of Joshua chapters 5-6. Joshua and the Israelites were on the way to the Promised Land after they had spent 40 years in the desert. Jericho was the gate for the land of Canaan. Jericho was the first city for the Israelites to conquer in order to enter the Promised Land. But the walls of Jericho were tall and thick. To the Israelites the walls of Jericho was the invincible fortress. But Joshua trusted in God who had promised to give this land to his ancestors. Joshua commanded his people to trust in God and obey him whatever he said. According to God's command they marched around the walls of Jericho for seven days. Joshua chapter 6 describes this story in detail. They marched around the walls for six days in silence, and on the seventh day after marching around the walls seven times, then they shouted in loud voices along with the trumpet sounds, and then the walls collapsed. God's commands sounded funny and unrealistic. God's strategy looked ridiculous. But when they trusted and obeyed, the walls collapsed and they conquered Jericho.

 We often think of God's will as unrealistic. God's way looks funny. But when we trust in him and obey his word, we will see the walls of Jericho collapsing in front of our eyes. Some may face invincible obstacles like the walls of Jericho. The walls are tall and thick. But nothing is impossible with the LORD. We'll watch the walls falling down before our eyes when we trust and obey him. What is your Red Sea? Where is your Jericho? I pray that we all may cross the Red Sea and conquer Jericho by faith. May God help us to experience one miracle after another when we live by faith. Amen.

 These days some leaders of our church visit Wash U campus, walk around it, pray, and come home. They are like the Israelites who marched around Jericho. They did so because they believe that God will open hearts of students as he opened the walls of Jericho. No matter how difficult mission is for them, God will work when they walk around and pray. May God enable us to see the wall of Jericho fall and its door wide open this semester. Amen!

Third, Rahab's personal faith saved her family. (31) Look at verse 31. "***By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.***" Rahab was a gentile prostitute who lived in Jericho. Her name was included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. (Mt 1:5) What made her faith special? Her story is written in the book of Joshua in chapter 2 and 6. Before Joshua attacked Jericho, he sent two men to spy out Jericho. The two spies hid in Rahab's house. Rahab knew that they were the Israelites spies, but did not report to Jericho police. Instead, she encouraged them to believe that God gave Jericho to the Israelites. Later she hid the spies from the Jericho police. Her act was an evident act of betrayal. But her behavior was commended as an act of faith. She had personal faith in the God of Israel, who made the heavens and the earth (Jos 2:11) She had a sense of history about the God of Israel, who had destroyed all the enemies of Israel. (Jos 2:10) She had fear of the God of Israel. She feared God rather than the king of Jericho. She had personal faith in God Almighty. She asked the spies to remember her and her family and to save them when God gives Jericho to the hand of Israel. Joshua kept his promise and saved Rahab and her family when they attacked Jericho. (Jos 6:25) Later Rahab married Salmon, the descendant of Abraham, and became the great, great, grandmother of King David. (Mt 1:5-6)

 Through the story of Rahab we learn that our personal faith in God goes beyond all other human barriers and conditions such as race, nationality, gender, social position, and so on. Men look at outward appearance, but God looks at our hearts. God values our personal faith more than our moral uprightness. Rahab pleased God with her faith, not with her morality. Rahab's personal faith encourages us to come to God just as we are. God values our faith. God wants us to work hard for his glory even though we make some moral and ethical mistakes. Only faith does matter with God! Amen!

Fourth, faith of Judges (32-33) In the OT after Joshua and the Israelites entered the Promised Land, several Judges served and ruled them before their kings appeared. Among the judges some are commended for their faith. Look at v.32. " ***And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell you about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets***." Before God called Gideon, he was a fearful man, who was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites (Jdg 6:11) God called Gideon, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Gideon responded to God's calling and defeated his enemies with his 300 soldiers.(Jdg 7:20). Barak is not a judge, but a general under the leadership of the prophet Deborah. Barak humbly asked for help from Deborah when he attacked his enemies. (Jdg 4:8). Samson's story is popular. His story has been made into movies and dramas. But he was not a righteous leader, but an immoral macho man. Still, he repented for his sins and gave his life to save his people from the Philistines at the end of his life. (Jdg 13-16) Judge Jephthah' story is somewhat sad to hear. He made a foolish oath before God. He made a vow to God, "*If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me,...I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.*" (Jdg 11:31) As he prayed, God gave him a victory. But who came out of his house to meet him was his unmarried only daughter. His daughter asked her father to give her two months to meet her friends and allowed to be sacrificed. Two months later Jephthah kept his vow. (Jdg 11:38-39) According to our modern moral and ethical viewpoint we don't understand them, but all of them were commended by God for their faith.

 The stories of David and Samuel are written in 1 & 2 Samuel. Samuel did many great things before God as the spiritual leader of Israel. One of his great achievements was to find David and anoint him as a king next to Saul. Samuel knew that God would depose the proud King Saul and raise David as a shepherd for his people. David was known as a man after God's own heart. When he was a shepherd boy, he fearlessly challenged Goliath and rescued his people. At that time David said to Goliath, "*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel...*" (1 Sa 17:45) Then David knocked out the giant with one sling shot. Even though David made a mistake which tarnished his fame, when David repented his sin with tears, God forgave him and made him an ancestor of the Messiah Jesus.

Fifth, the persevering faith of the suffering prophets (33-38) After David and Solomon's united kingdom, Israel was divided into two, North Israel and South Judah. Because of their constant idolatry and apostasy, God sent his servants, prophets, to deliver God's message for judgment by sending foreign armies from North and South. All these prophecies of God's divine judgment and restoration are the main themes of the major prophets. The kings of Northern Israel and Southern Judah persecuted the prophets who had warned against their sin and delivered the message of God's impending judgment. The suffering prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and so on. Isaiah was sawed in two by King Manasseh. Jeremiah was beaten and imprisoned, then he was thrown into the dungeon by King Zedekiah (Jer 37:15-16) Prophet Zechariah delivered the message of repentance to King Joash and his people. Then the king and his people stoned him to death in the courtyard of the temple. (2 Chr 24:21) Verses 36-38 talk about their story. "***Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground***."

 Before Israel was invaded and destroyed by Assyria, there were two great prophets in Israel; they were Elijah and Elisha. They were also suffering servants under evil kings. Elijah was persecuted by King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel. Elijah challenged the Baal worshipers and priests on Mount Carmel. He asked his people who were wavering between God and Baal, "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.*" (1Ki 18:21) God proved that he is the true God by sending fire on Elijah's sacrifice. Elijah killed all Baal priests by sword. Because of this Elijah was hated more by queen Jezebel and chased by her. Elijah fled from her and hid himself in the caves in Mount Horeb.

 While Elijah was chased by king Ahab, he went down to Zarephath to feed his hungry stomach. There he met a poor widow who had only one son. She had no hope in this world and was about to die after eating her last meal. Elijah asked her to give her food to him. By faith she gave to Elijah because he was the man of God. God blessed her faith. Later Elijah raised her dead son back to life. (1Ki 17:22) In 2 Kings 4:18-37 there is a story how Prophet Elisha raised the dead son of the Shunammite woman back to life. Now look at verse 35. "***Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection."***

 As the prophets had warned, God's judgment came. North Israel was destroyed by Assyria and South Judah by Babylonia. Prophet Daniel and Ezekiel were those who were exiled to Babylonia. At their young age, they lost their country and were captured and sent to a foreign country. But they did not lose their identity as people of God. They kept their faith at risk of their lives. Look at verses 33-34. "***who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies***." Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, did not bow down to the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. They denied idol worship. So, they were thrown into the blazing furnace. But a miracle happened. No one was burned by fire. There was even no smell of fire on them. The angel quenched the fury of the flames for these three men of faith who kept their identity as people of God (Dan 3). Later Daniel was also thrown into a den of lions because he did not worship King Darius. The king and his people thought that Daniel was mauled by the hungry lions. But a miracle happened! Daniel was playing with the lions as he did with several cats. God shut the mouths of lions. God protected his servant when they risked their lives to keep their faith as people of God. (Dan 6)

 Look at verse 38 a. "***the world was not worthy of them***." Indeed, this perishing world is not worthy of all these great heroes and heroines of faith. Their life of faith is so precious and beautiful. They are like shining stars in the dark sky and glittering diamonds in the mud. Verse 39 says, "***These were all commended for their faith..***." They all lived by faith that pleases God. They all believed that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (11:6) None of them received what had been promised. But none of them returned to their old life or country, but kept their faith in God to the end. To the last minute of their life on this earth they trusted in God. Look at verse 40, "***Since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.***" Even though they did not receive what God promised during their lifetime, they didn't mind. This is because they believed a better gift, a heavenly reward which they would receive in the future. They believed in God's divine plan and his absolute love for them which made their life of faith perfect and beautiful.

 In conclusion, what can we learn from all these men and women of faith in this chapter? They were not afraid of death. They did not love this world. They expected better resurrection, better blessing, which is in heaven. For them faith was their choice and perseverance. For them faith was victory. I pray that we may all consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory in the future. By faith let us overcome this pandemic and advance the gospel, raise Jesus' disciples and expand God's kingdom. The new semester starts next week in each campus. May God help us to reach out to students by faith for Bible study. Amen!