

Faith from the Unlikely

Heroes, Part 9

Hebrews 11:29-31

A reporter once asked Walt Disney how it felt to be so famous. He responded by saying, “Well, it helps me get good tickets for a football game.” But he went on to add, “But it doesn’t help me command the obedience of my daughter, or impress my wife, or even help me make a better shot in a polo game. In fact, he said, being famous doesn’t even seem to help keep fleas off my dog. So, if being famous doesn’t give me an advantage over a couple of fleas, I guess it’s not worth that much after all.”ⁱ

Isn’t that great – and rather rare – to hear down-to-earth realism from someone internationally famous?

But that reporter’s question was interesting – “how does it feel to be famous?” The average person on the street is somewhat convinced that famous people just feel better . . . they must live better lives . . . they have some kind of leading edge even on happiness or perspective or practical wisdom.

I have read that Henry Ford, the multimillionaire automaker, was hounded by journalists and reporters asking for his advice on everything from the price of wheat to politics to even advice on how to have a great marriage. Advice he freely dished out – even on marriage, even though for years he’d kept a mistress behind his wife’s back.

I’m convinced that the average Christian is fairly convinced, deep down, that God’s kingdom moves forward by famous people – those really important people – you know, impressive people with natural charisma and natural abilities and a stellar track record.

Which is why the church seems to get so excited when somebody famous or wealthy or well-connected comes to faith; as if the angel’s sing a

little louder at their conversion . . . as if God’s work can really get a jump on things now that they’ve been added.

The truth is we’re surprised when God uses ordinary people . . . average people without stellar resume’s and impressive connections. You know . . . everyday kind of people.

We might not admit it, but the church is somewhat surprised when God has plans for someone who has miserably failed in the past.

You’ve probably heard the story and wondered if it really happened. It really did. Ken Sande writes in his book entitled, *Peacemaker*, that when Thomas Edison and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb it took literally hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, Edison handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the young man turned and started up a flight of stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps. Edison reassured him that it would be alright and turned to his stunned co-workers and simply ordered that they begin again. It was completed several days later and to the surprise of his staff, Edison took the bulb, walked over to that same errand boy and said, “Please take this upstairs to the testing room.” And this time, without incident, he did.ⁱⁱ

I love that story.

But the surprising part of the story, at least to me, isn’t so much that Edison trusted that errand boy the second time – it’s that he trusted him the first time.

I mean, what are you doing giving the light bulb to an errand boy in the first place?! I would have expected Edison to carry that precious light bulb up the stairs himself, right?

Isn't it wonderful to consider the fact that God uses errand boys – He uses ordinary people to carry His light; He uses run-of-the-mill people to demonstrate His power through their unspectacular, common-place, speckled with failure . . . lives.

The average Christian gets to Hebrews chapter 11 starts reading through the list of great heroes of the faith –

- Abel – of course;
- Enoch – he deserved it;
- Noah – of course;
- Abraham and Sarah – absolutely;
- Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – obviously;
- Moses – no surprise there . . . these are the famous people of Israel.

I mean, these are the famous ones . . . these are the legends, born with some kind of cutting edge on faith. We're not surprised at all to find these famous men and women listed in this legacy of faith.

And then the Christian thinks to himself, "You know, I'd never make into this ledger . . . not me."

Well, keep reading.

You're about to discover two entries of the most unlikely candidates ever.

If they were famous, it wasn't for being faithful, but unfaithful. There's even the name of a woman added to this ledger of faith – not because she was a shining example, in fact, she was notoriously sinful.

You see, God is about to inform us that faith can come from the lives of the most unlikely people.

If you have your Bibles open to *Hebrews chapter 11*, I want us to cover the entries here regarding the Israelites and Rahab.

In *verse 29*, we shift from Moses to the plural pronoun which includes the entire people of Israel – notice – *By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.*

Eighty verses from the Book of Exodus are condensed into this one verse.

One thing that you need to know, which makes *Hebrews 11:29* really stand out, is that the Israelites leave Egypt and everything's going great, until they get word that Pharaoh's army is after them and they are pinned down between mountains on one side, a dessert plain on another; the soldiers at their rear and the Red Sea in front of them.

They are virtually stuck!

And they said to Moses, *Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die*

in the wilderness? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians . . . for it would have been better to for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness (Exodus 14:11-12).

That doesn't sound like faith to me! We'll come back to their response in a moment, but first . . .

The liberals and critics are quick to point out that the Red Sea can be translated Sea of Reeds. So, they conclude, this is some shallow, knee deep marsh land . . . it wasn't much of a sea at all and it would have been nothing miraculous for them to wade across.

Well isn't that a little embarrassing then for the Egyptian army to drown in knee deep water? Can't they swim in the shallow end?

This Red Sea was deep enough to cause the children of Israel to assume they are hopelessly pinned down and there's no way out – and deep enough to drown the entire Egyptian army.

And I love Moses' command to the people of fear – which transformed them into a people of faith. He said, "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today . . . you will never see the Egyptians again forever . . . the Lord will fight for you while you keep silent (Exodus 14:13 & 14)

By the way, one command repeats itself in both events here in Hebrews 11 – at the Red Sea and at the City of Jericho – the people are told remain silent.

Just be quiet and watch . . . in other words, God does ask them to do something – but He graciously only asks them to do what they can possibly do as an act of faith – remain quiet.

Here's a key principle of faith: faith is willingness to obey God, even when it seems hopeless.

We're told in the fullest accounting that God caused an east wind to sweep in. God divided the waters of the sea in two . . . that powerful wind dried out the riverbed so that in a few hours nearly 3 million Israelites would risk their lives and by faith walk between two walls of water.

Now at this point you might have a picture in your mind of Moses – he has long white hair and a white beard and he looks like Charlton Heston. And you've got this narrow passageway of water through which Israelites walked 2 or 3 side-by side.

Not quite.

What would it have taken to get millions of people across a dry riverbed in quick fashion before the morning watch? Thanks to expositors who evidently enjoyed math while growing up – I can't imagine why – they've estimated the dry riverbed would have had to be hundreds of yards wide – even as wide as a mile. And the line of people and wagons and cattle could have stretched for nearly a mile as well.

And that took faith.

Exodus records that the waters stood up like a wall . . . imagine that sight.

We're not told if the Lord caused the current to stop flowing downstream – if He did, the wall of water upstream would have continued growing higher and higher and higher.

But we are told in poetic form that the waters congealed – the word refers to a solid substance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moses writes, ***“the deeps were congealed”*** (*Exodus 15:8*) Even the form of the water was now part of the miracle.

And the Israelites went through . . . rather quickly I would assume. Wouldn't you have? I don't think anybody was taking pictures or stopping to look at the fish stuck in walls of congealed water.

Arthur Pink in his commentary on this passage said there are three degrees of faith:

1. The first is a faith that receives. Like empty handed beggars, we receive Christ.
2. The second is a faith that reckons. That is, it counts upon God to fulfill His promise whether we *do* anything or not.
3. The third is a faith that risks. That is, it believes God's promises and also dares to do something for the Lord.^{iv}

This is the daring of David running out to meet Goliath. This is the daring of Elijah calling the false prophets to the top of Mount Carmel; this is the life daring of the Apostles who defied their leaders and continued to preach the gospel of Christ.

And this is the daring of the Israelites. We know the story and so we are tempted to think – oh yea, the waters were divided and they walked through, ho hum . . .

Listen, they can't just believe the promise. They can't just receive the promise – they have to risk everything and walk down the banks of the Red Sea and into that dry river bed and then walk between towering walls of water that blotted out the sunlight

and could come crashing down on them at any moment.

This is a faith that risks everything – this is one of the greatest corporate acts of faith in Israel's history . . . they risked their lives without any guarantee except the promise of God.

Hebrews 11 informs us that the Egyptians came after them and God caused that dry river bed to immediately begin to draw moisture in and their chariot wheels began to bog down and then those two walls of water rushed toward them with unbelievable force and they all, to a man, died.

Historians record that it would be nearly an entire generation before Egyptians would even venture near the Red Sea again.

This is one of the greatest national acts of faith in Israel's entire history.

Notice ***verse 30. By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.***

You need to understand that there is a 40 year gap ***between verse 29 and verse 30.***

The Israelites who crossed the Red Sea are not the same Israelites who crossed the Jordan and are now facing the city of Jericho.

This particular story takes place a generation later in the Book of Joshua.

This time, the writer of Hebrews condenses 83 verses into these two verses in Hebrews 11.

If you went back to the Journal of Joshua, you would discover the full story. The Israelites have just crossed the Jordan River – again God miraculously divided the water and the people walked across on dry land.

Only this time, they were trusting God to lead them on their way as they move into the land promised to their father Abraham.

And their first stop is before the walled fortress of Jericho.

We learned as children, many of us, that classic old spiritual in Sunday school; “Joshua fought the battle a Jericho – Joshua fought the battle a Jericho and the walls – what? – came a tumblin' down.

Just not so fast!

Jericho barred their entrance into Canaan. It was a massive fortress standing in their way. The city was armed to the teeth with well-equipped, heavily armed legionnaires.^v

And here stand the Israelites – most of them carrying pitchforks and cattle prods.

Remember, this would have been the city the spies came back to report about in Deuteronomy 1. And the report included these words – from *Deuteronomy 1:28* listen to this – ***the people are bigger and taller than we are and their city walls reach up to heaven (Deuteronomy 1:28).***

Never mind!

That report had thrown Israel into such a panic that they spent the next 40 years wandering around because of their unbelief in God’s promise and power.

Two of the spies had said, “No . . . C’mon, we can take it!” They were voted down.

But now – two of those young spies are now forty years older.

Joshua and Caleb are back!

So what’s the plan?

Joshua records that God commanded this unusual strategy.

Once a day, soldiers, priests and people were to walk around the city of Jericho. Priests in front of the procession were to carry the Ark of the Covenant and seven of them were to continually blow their trumpets made out of ram’s horns. Once around the city, one time a day, for six days. Then on the seventh day, they were to walk around the city 7 times. And then after a long trumpet blast the people are to shout at the top of their lungs and the walls will fall down.

Is there a plan B?

Nope . . . that’s it.

Imagine some soldiers on top of the city walls looking down at this procession. Can you imagine some of them yelling down to some Israelites, “What in the world are you doing?”

“We’re conquering your city?”

“How’s that?”

“We’re going to walk around your city once a day for six days.”

“That’s pretty scary . . . then what?”

“Then were going to walk around it seven times on the seventh day.”

“That’s terrifying . . . then what?”

“Then our heads priests are going to play a long note on their trumpet and we’re going to yell at your city at the top of our lungs.”

“Stop, we can’t take it . . . then what?”

“Then the walls are going to fall come crashing down.”

By the way, this conversation could not have taken place simply because part of God’s command

was that all the people remain absolutely silent during their march around the city.

Which was such wisdom from the Lord; can you imagine the potential grumbling after day 4? Hey, not one stone of this wall has even budged. We oughtta be building ladders or digging tunnels.

One author wrote, “How much mischief is created by people perpetually talking of the difficulties in the task confronting us. Listen, he writes, all real Christian service is beset with difficulties – Satan will see to that.”^{vi}

Hudson Taylor, the missionary pioneer to China said that there are three stages to God’s will: Impossible . . . difficult . . . done.^{vii}

Impossible . . . difficult . . . done.

There will always be difficulties and challenges and disappointments. We happen to be fallen sinners working with fallen sinners trying to reach fallen sinners.

How tough can that be?!

That’s why there is no such thing as opportunity without an equal amount of opposition; in fact, the greater the opportunity, the greater the opposition.

I read just this past week as Adoniram Judson baptized one of the petty chief in Burma, a huge crowd showed up and lined the river and as soon as the chief came up out of the water the crowd began to laugh.^{viii}

What a fool . . . what a crazy ordinance . . . you look like a wet fool!

Here in our church when someone is baptized we clap; imagine being baptized and people come to sneer and mock.

Can you imagine these armies up on that wall laughing and jeered and mocking?

What a test of faith this was.

Here’s the key principle: Not only is faith willingness to obey God, even when it seems hopeless, secondly, faith is willingness to follow God, even when it seems ridiculous.

We’ve walked around these walls 12 times and not a rumble . . . not one loose pebble . . . jeering blasphemy hurled down to you for 6 straight days.

What kind of military strategy is this anyway . . . have we come this far for nothing?

But I shall walk around it again – one more time – a 13th time. And then, in obedience, I will raise my voice in a shout of triumph, aimed at this pagan fortress of unbelief.

I will do it . . . and the entire nation did it together.

The priest blew that long note on his trumpet and then and all the people began to shout.

And I think – even to their own amazement – the walls came tumblin’ down.

Impossible . . . difficult . . . done!

Faith keeps walking!

And the story gets even better . . . even richer – notice one personal vignette of faith tucked into this amazing moment of national faith – notice *verse 31*. ***By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient (unbelieving), after she had welcomed the spies in peace.***

Here is a sentence you would never imagine to read – ***By faith, Rahab the harlot.***

Talk about famous . . . for all the wrong reasons. Talk about connections – and they were all the wrong ones.

Talk about the last person you’d ever think would be converted to faith in the living God.

Oh, but she had heard the stories. Joshua’s journal again tells us she told the spies – I’ve heard all about your God . . . I’ve even heard about you crossing – listen – she says, ***Joshua 2:10 – We have heard about how the Lord dried up the water of the Red sea.***

Not the Jordan River, which they had just crossed – no, no, I have heard about how you crossed the Red Sea 40 years ago – and our hearts melted within us.

Don’t miss this. 40 years ago when the spies returned and said there are giants in the land and cities with walls reaching up to heaven – a reference to Jericho . . . everyone panicked – but now we learn that their hearts had already melted in fear.

They were ready to be taken – if not converted – they were terrified of the miraculous power of the most powerful God they’d ever heard of.

And now here’s a prostitute with more faith than that entire generation of Israelites because she said, ***“When I heard that, I knew that the Lord had given you the land and that your God is the God of heaven and earth.” Joshua 2:11.***

“So . . . can I come with you? Would your God accept someone like me?”

Can I be your first convert in the land of Canaan. And they said, “Yes.”

Some have tried to soften the edges of this story by saying that the Hebrew word for harlot can be translated inn keeper . . . they often were part of the same industry.

The trouble with that is the Septuagint, the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible, translated 200 years before the birth of Christ – quoted by Christ at times, used a Greek word that clearly meant prostitute.^{ix}

More importantly, the word used by the writer of Hebrews here in chapter 11 as well as James in his letter where he refers to Rahab, used the same word, “porne (πορνη) which gives us our word pornography, translated fornicator.^x

She didn’t run a bed a breakfast, she ran a brothel. Why soften the story. This is the point of her glorious story – God demonstrated His grace to an unlikely prospect who then becomes the most unlikely person in her entire city to become a demonstration of living faith in God.

She will stake her entire future on the power of God and the grace of God to accept her.

Faith is our willingness to forget the failure of our past and risk everything about our future as we obey God.

Let me wrap up our study with two enduring truths from these stories of surprising faith.

First, your weakness doesn’t hamper God’s performance through your life.

Griffith Thomas, an expositor, pastor and author, who among other things, helped in the formation of Dallas Theological Seminary in the early 1900’s, wrote in his little commentary I have on ***Hebrews II***, said that faith is convinced that God exists; that God is able; that God is ever present; that God can perform what He wills; that God is has proven himself and will yet prove Himself faithful again.

He wrote that, like David of old, every believer has 5 small pebbles to use; they are – God is . . . God has . . . God does . . . God can . . . and God will.^{xi}

Little pebbles work really well in the hands of little, ordinary, common, run-of-the-mill people.

And God can make the giants fall and the water part and the walls fall and sinners turn in faith. God receives all the credit from little people.

Hudson Taylor who was asked, “Aren’t you amazed at how honored you are to see what the China Inland Mission has accomplished?” And Hudson Taylor responded, “I think that God must have been looking for someone small enough . . . for Him to use, so that all the glory might be His, and He found me.”^{xii}

I love it when famous people of faith talk like that . . . they are for real . . . they're the genuine item. Let's all talk like that!

Your weakness doesn't hamper God's performance through your life.

Secondly, your past doesn't hinder God's plans for your life.

Look at Israel . . . what a past . . . what a future.

Look at Rahab . . . hey listen, do you have a checkered past? I doubt it was any more tainted than Rahab's.

Let me encourage you to leave your reputation in the hands of God; and go about your business of living for Him.

Look at Rahab's past. But look at her future.

She is rescued after the walls fall down . . . she and her family. It isn't long before a godly Israelite man named Salmon meets her and is so moved by where she'd been and how she'd believed and what she risked – he says, this is the woman I've been waiting for to be my wife.

He proposes – she accepts. Get this – he's one of the princes of Judah – he's a member of the royal, messianic line.

And they soon have a baby boy and they name him, Boaz.

And Boaz grows up hearing the testimony of his mom's faith; her past didn't ruin his life either. He grew up watching his faithful Jewish father and his faithful Gentile mother . . . and his little heart is prepared to do the same – for he will marry a Gentile woman who left her past nation of idolaters behind and trusted by faith in the God of Israel.

And a couple of generations later, their great-great grandson will be named King David.

Look at her past . . . look at her future.

When I preached in recently in Medellin, Colombia, the house was packed an hour before the service began. Wisdom for the Heart is played 3 times a day in Spanish throughout 14 countries in South America on 90 radio stations. This was my first time to go down there. We preached and Juan Lopez translated. At the end of the service an invitation was given for those who wanted help and counsel to make their way to the front – it was a major traffic jam with people everywhere. About an hour later as the building was nearly empty and I think I had signed every Bible in the house, a staff member brought up on stage a woman. Folks had evidently been praying for her. She had come after all. The translator filled in the gaps, telling me that this woman was now going to be leaving a life of prostitution; she was also a drug courier for one of the cartels. With tears and joy in her eyes she told me that she now belonged to Jesus Christ. What a past . . . what a future.

Every one of us has the same intersection with God's grace. For Christ came – the offspring of mixed Gentile and Jewish blood, to redeem for Himself a bride from every tongue, tribe and nation.

Oh man, look at your past . . . look at your past . . . just imagine your future.

And in the meantime, remember your weakness doesn't hamper God's power; and your past doesn't hinder God's plans.

And faith demonstrated through unlikely people – we discover – is willingness to forget the failure of our past and risk everything about our future as we walk with our faithful Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/2/2012 by Stephen Davey.

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