

Hebrews 11:32-40

Back in the 1950s researchers began to do some research on why people went to work. In that decade and the following one they found that a large proportion of people were working mainly to build a better life for their children. In the 70s and 80s that began to change. The so-called Baby Boomer generation were no longer motivated by such long term goals. They were working for their own future; their own retirement. But then a further shift began to happen in the 90s. The post-Boomer generation, what some have called Generation X, did not work even for their own long term benefit, they worked to enjoy their earnings now. Personal ambitions became increasingly short term. They were working for the next holiday, the next car, or even the weekend! And ambition to create a better world for their children, became a quest for self-development, self-realisation, self-fulfilment.

Sadly there is no evidence that this newer way of thinking actually makes us happier. On the contrary the evidence is that working for short term and more personal pleasures builds up a long term sense of disappointment and cynicism.

And yet it seems to me that Christians and churches have embraced this short-termism. Every church seems to announce itself as “vibrant” and promise that “lives are transformed.”

Of course they have to. Put on your website “sometimes our prayer meetings can be a bit boring” and “we are full of people who are struggling with the same sins they were five years ago” and you might as well shut up shop.

But our culture’s insatiable desire for instant satisfaction is deadly to churches, and more importantly deadly to Christians. Of course there are short term benefits in the Christian life. Of course churches should be doing their utmost every week to feed and encourage and uplift tired Christians – they should aim to be “vibrant.”

However Christians who are always seeking short term highs, and short term benefits end up immature, spiritually emaciated, miserable and defeated.

For Christians the walk of faith is something much deeper, much richer, much more glorious, but in the short term potentially much more costly. For typical Generation X-ers it is completely countercultural – and yet it is the path to a depth of joy which no short-term thinker will ever discover.

That is what Hebrews 11 has been drawing us towards these last few weeks. It is answering the question “so what is faith?” That was a real question from the heart for the people to whom the letter was written, because they were facing terrible persecution. And in Hebrews 10 they had been urged not to “shrink back” but to “have faith.”

So what is faith? We saw first of all that faith is simply the faculty that all people exercise about things that they cannot see. No-one lives only by sight. The only difference between people is *what* they believe about the unseen realms of existence. Christian faith is belief in the creator God who sent his son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins, and to rise again for our eternal hope.

Then we saw that faith is about who and what we trust. Abraham trusted God and his word, and his trust was vindicated.

In Moses we saw that Christian faith is about what we long for. Moses was prepared to forgo all the treasures of Egypt for the privilege of following God, and inheriting his eternal reward.

But for our last look at Hebrews 11 we must focus on something which has been implied and sometimes stated throughout the chapter and yet which comes centre stage at the end. We need to ask what does biblical faith achieve?

Our first answer from this chapter is that it achieves great things.

➤ ***Biblical faith achieves great things***

📖 **Hebrews 11:32-35a**

What a list! Gideon won his battle after cutting down his troops to 300. Barak, despite being a bit of a wus defeated a regiment of tanks, or rather chariots, with infantrymen. Samson was more was like Robocop and the Terminator combined. Jephthah made Bruce Willis look like a wimp. If king David had fought in the Second World War he would have both made Churchill's speeches, and been in the front line on the Normandy beaches. And then think about the outright miracles. Daniel not eaten by lions. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego surviving in a furnace. Even people raised to life.

The obvious implication is that biblical faith achieve great things through miracles!

○ ***through miracles***

This is the whole thrust of the so called health and wealth teachers today. They point to these stories, and passages like this, and they say that if we have enough faith then miracles like these can be ours. There is no doubt that the intention of our author is to show that great miracles are sometimes seen by people of faith. Those who doubt that anything miraculous happens today could rightly be criticised as not believing in the God of the Bible.

However the miracles mentioned are overwhelmingly salvation miracles. They are miracles that God uses to save his people. In the New Testament the great salvation miracle is the resurrection of Jesus and the promised resurrection of his people in the new heaven and new earth. There is no promise in scripture, for instance, that our faith will make us rich, or even that faith in general will bring healing. The promise is that Christian guarantees and inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade kept in heaven for us, and that though we die we will live eternally.

And these miracles are actually very rare. The only time when miracles become commonplace is in the earthly ministry of Jesus. Both before and after that in the Bible overt miracles are rare one off events.

Biblical faith is sometimes associated with amazing miracles. But actually the thrust of what Hebrews 11 is telling us is that it achieves great things through obedience.

○ ***Through obedience***

Look at Abraham for instance: v8

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went.

Or Moses – v27

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Faith achieves great things through obedience. Sometimes God backs that obedience up with overt miracles – such as the parting of the Red Sea. Sometimes his overruling less obviously a miracle. When Abraham obeyed God and took his son Isaac up the mountain apparently to offer him as a sacrifice, God ordained that a ram should be available as a substitute. The cynic would say “that was no miracle rams get caught by their horns all the time.” But it was at the right time, and the right place.

Sometimes it is just the obedience itself which achieves great things. Verse 33 mentions “administering justice” as something people did by faith. Perhaps he is alluding to Daniel, or some of the kings of Israel. The point is however that their faith equipped them to become men of integrity and so to administer justice.

Indeed the primary call in every age is to obey God, to follow Christ, and let him provide whatever miracles, or overruling providences he wants to provide. Modern biblical Christianity owes its existence in one sense to one man who did just that – Martin Luther.

In the early 16th century he was rediscovering what the Bible really taught and in 1521 he got hauled before a church tribunal called a Diet, in a town called Worms.

Hence the joke about the schoolboy who wrote that Martin Luther lived on a diet of worms.

At this hearing is reputed to have made this summary statement of his position.

"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience would be neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I can do no other."

Luther's conscience was captive to the word of God and he was prepared to face death rather than go against it. Indeed others before him had been killed but this was God's moment. Against all odds Luther stayed alive, and the movement which became the Protestant church was born.

History is full of such people. I could mention William Carey who became the father of modern missions. Or close to home Gerald Henagulph who took on an almost dead church called Magdalen Road Mission Hall 1947 and saw it revived and serving East Oxford while all around churches closed. Because, as Brian his son will tell you, he obeyed God.

And what about the founders of our Sunflowers and Buttercup music groups, particularly Karen Avery and Nic Carpenter who have laboured to bring hundreds if not now over a thousand families within the orbit of the church and the gospel? Or Sunday school teachers? Or those who have welcomed newcomers and encouraged them so that they have been better equipped as they then go out to all the world serving Christ?

I think most of us have no idea how much our simple obedience achieves. Acts of Christian obedience have a domino effect, one leads to another, to another and before long everything has been affected. A kind word, leads to a person attending church, leads to their conversion, leads to a fruitful life, leads to dozens being converted, leads to churches planted, leads to who knows! Faith achieves amazing things through obedience.

But here is the most important thing that our author wants to impress upon us.

➤ *biblical faith is about something greater than immediate reward*

📖 **Hebrews 11:35 – to gain a better resurrection**

Here's the thing. The obedience of faith is not dependent on short term rewards – it is focused on eternal reward. Here's where the health and wealth teachers lead us astray. Here is where our modern church cultures which exclusively talk about the good life now are making us weak. Here is where the rubber hits the road for modern young Christians who have been conditioned to only think in the short term.

Will you be obedient if you get no reward in this life? More than that, do you have a joy in God and a hunger for true reward which will make you choose obedience over instant gratification, not because you must, but because you prefer it?

They were tortured, they refused to be released, that they might gain!

We are not even promised the pleasure of imagining ourselves famous after our death because of our sacrifice. That seems to be the thrust of the next few verses.

📖 **Hebrews 11:36-37**

He may be drawing on some traditions here. Such as the tradition that the Old Testament prophet Isaiah was sawn in two by the wicked king. But overwhelmingly these are unknown people he is describing. That is the point.

If you go to the cemeteries on the Western Front of the First World War – you will find in every cemetery at least one headstone which says “A soldier of the Great War known unto God.” He died but we do not know his name – but God does.

So too the history of God's church is the history innumerable people that vast majority of whom are entirely forgotten. It is the history of people who themselves saw none, or almost none of their inheritance. Indeed their main physical experience was not achievement but loss.

📖 **Hebrews 11:38**

But it was not a life of loss. It was not a life of misery. Indeed it was a life chosen because of a deeper hunger, and a deeper joy. It was a life that looked forward to something better.

📖 **Hebrews 11:39-40**

Their hope, and our hope is to be gathered together in the glorious throng of praise and joy and love and eternal pleasures in the presence of God which is our promised inheritance. Every act of obedience receives its reward there. No life of faith lacks its glorious culmination. All God's people find their final contentment.

You are elderly here? Though your outward body is wasting away you are being renewed inwardly and you will be rewarded fully. Be joyful. Invest the last vestiges of energy that you have in that glorious hope.

You are middle aged like me? Don't let your life fizzle out with a wimper. Make sure you are as zealous as you ever were for this reward.

You are young here? What a tragedy to live from short term fix to short term fix. What a tragedy to only fix your eyes on what you can achieve in this life, even if it is good Christian things. Let those wonderful things happen if and when God wants it, but let your eye be on your eternal reward, and embrace the obedience of faith.

The short story writer Flannery O'Connor once described her life like this.

"Picture me with my ground teeth, stalking joy - fully armed too as it's a dangerous quest."

Dangerous it is, and potentially lacking all physical reward in the here and now. But it is the life of every person of biblical faith who has ever lived. Indeed it is the life of Christ.

 **Hebrews 12:1-3**