

11. The writer concluded his treatment of Israel's legacy of faith with a sweeping summary. He mentioned a few other figures in Israel's history and gave an overview of their works of faith, and then concluded by underscoring the suffering that is faith's reward in this world (11:32-38). From the historical standpoint, his previous examples spanned the time from the beginning of human history until Israel's conquest of Canaan. This last group of individuals fill out the balance of the Israelite salvation history, stretching from the time of the Judges through the era of Israel's prophets. Thus the author spanned the sweep of Old Testament revelation in his consideration of Israel's heritage of faith. He began with the faithful son of the first man, and closed with the prophets who ministered in faith as they looked to the singular prophet and preeminent man of faith – the man who would embody in himself all of Israel's heritage of faith.

As a first observation, it's important to note the writer's emphasis on the *negative* as well as the positive fruit of faith and faithfulness. He spoke of the positive fruit first, and then turned immediately to the sorts of difficulties God's faithful experienced in times past – difficulties that his readers were themselves experiencing because of their faith. These Jewish Christians knew well that all of the faithful profiled in the epistle experienced suffering as well as triumph, and so it was with them. Faith/faithfulness triumphs in great spiritual victories, and sometimes even temporal ones, but that triumph always comes at the cost of contradiction, opposition and suffering. By God's design, His children grow and attain maturity in their sonship through the things they suffer. As it was for the unique Son, so it is for all of the children who share in His life and are perfected in His likeness (ref. 5:7-8; cf. also Philippians 1:29 with Romans 8:9-17; 2 Corinthians 4:1-18).

Christians through the centuries have pondered the writer's choice of these men as his concluding examples. David and Samuel are obvious choices, for they were hugely significant figures in Israel's history and notable men of faith. The others, and three of them in particular, seem unusual and unlikely choices: Jephthah and Barak by virtue of their relative obscurity and evident failures, and Samson because of his ungodliness and rebellion. In a list of Israel's faithful judges, these three names would likely not be at the top. In the end, it's impossible to know why these particular men came to mind, but the scriptural account of their lives perhaps sheds some light.

- First, the Scriptures describe Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson as judges empowered by Yahweh's Spirit (Judges 6:34, 11:29, 13:25, 14:6, 19). This doesn't suggest the Spirit's permanent indwelling in the New Testament sense, but it does highlight them as men whom God used mightily as He shepherded His covenant people. This distinction might have caused them to stand out to the writer's thinking.
- Second, the biblical accounts of these men are captivating and well known to the Jewish people. That might help explain their mention here, but most especially as their stories suit the writer's emphasis and larger goal. These men whom God chose to lead Israel as judges struggled with doubt, fear, unbelief, and disobedience, and yet they all ultimately triumphed in faith. Their stories, then, provided strong encouragement to the readers to run their own race with endurance, trusting the One to whom their faith looked (ref. 12:1-2).

The way the writer listed these final individuals also supports this perspective. For he didn't present them in historical order as with his previous examples, which suggests that he was viewing them more collectively than individually. As examples of faith, they together underscore the truth that faithfulness involves suffering as well as triumph: *They were men who faced great adversity and opposition and were compelled to make difficult, even agonizing decisions. Yet through the discipline of their enacted faith, they glorified God and advanced His purposes in the world.* At the same time, these men bore this collective witness as *individuals*, so that their inclusion here carries the heritage of faith forward from the conquest of Canaan to the close of the Old Testament era.

The author listed the six men (and Yahweh's prophets) as a collective, and he described their works of faith and faithfulness in the same way (vv. 33-37). Again, his Jewish readers knew the Scriptures and Israel's long story, and so would have recognized how these descriptions applied to each of the men. But most readers today don't share this familiarity, so that a brief survey is in order.

With the exception of Barak and David, all of the men named here were *judges* in Israel. The judges were God's appointed rulers during the period between the conquest of Canaan and the emergence of the monarchy. Israel was a true *theocracy* at that time, having no human king. Instead, Yahweh ruled His people through human leaders He commissioned at critical times of need. This period spanned some three and a half centuries and ended with Saul's installation as Israel's first king.

Israel served no human king during the time of the judges, but even Yahweh's kingship was in question. The book of Judges records this period in Israel's history, and the book's central feature is a conspicuous cyclical pattern consisting of *complacency, rebellion, apostasy, subjugation, repentance, deliverance, and restoration*. In the book's account, this pattern recurred through seven distinct cycles associated with numerous judges (including Samuel). Each cycle brought divine retribution against Israel executed through Gentile oppression. The subjugation and suffering that resulted eventually provoked the people's repentance, and when they cried out to Yahweh, He raised up *judges* – female and male – to deliver them and restore the covenant relationship. Thus the judges were military, civil, and religious leaders commissioned by God to secure His kingdom and administer His rule. But Israel's wayward bent continued unabated, so that the people tended to follow their King only while His judges led them with a firm hand. With the passing of each judge, the nation drifted again into idolatry and apostasy until Yahweh gave them into the hand of their enemies (Judges 2:11-19; cf. also 17:6, 21:25).

- a. *Gideon* was the fifth (or fourth) of Israel's judges, and God raised him up to deliver the nation from the Midianites. God had defeated the Midianites through Moses, but lately He'd made them His weapon against His unfaithful people. For seven years Midian had oppressed Israel, sweeping into Canaan at harvest time and plundering the produce and livestock to the point that the land was devastated. Moreover, their attacks forced the Israelite people to flee from their homes to protect their own lives (Judges 6:1-6). When they cried out to Yahweh, He heard and sent His angel to appoint Gideon to be their deliverer (6:11-14).

Like so many other great men of faith, Gideon had an unimpressive background. He was descended from an unimportant family within the tribe of Manasseh, and was himself the youngest son of his father (6:15). Even more, he was a member of an idolatrous household, for his father was a worshipper of the Canaanite deities Baal and Asherah (6:25). As the son of an apostate father and a man of no consequence, Gideon was a most unexpected champion for Israel's God. But Yahweh sought just such a man, that His people would know that *He* was their deliverer. Whatever their unfaithfulness to Him and His covenant with them, He would remain faithful; He cannot deny Himself. And in His hand, Gideon proved faithful, first by destroying the implements of his father's idolatry (viewed as a capital crime by his neighbors), and then in leading a tiny force, whose size God had determined, against a massive army (6:25-7:25).

- b. *Barak* served alongside Deborah, who preceded Gideon as Israel's judge. Barak wasn't himself a judge, but he played a similar role in that the Lord called him to deliver Israel from their Canaanite oppressors. Yahweh sent Deborah, who was a prophetess, to commission Barak for this calling, and he consented on the condition that she accompany him in battle. Deborah agreed to his demand, but warned him that he was forfeiting the honor in victory; the Canaanite commander would be delivered into the hands of a woman (Judges 4:1-9).

Though hesitant and unwilling to obey God without Deborah's aid, Barak acted in faith by engaging the Canaanites in battle with only ten thousand foot soldiers. And through his faith, God granted Israel a marvelous victory as every member of Sisera's forces was slain at the point of the sword (4:14-16). Even Sisera himself fell to the God of Israel, and soon after the Canaanite king (4:17-24). This great triumph was commemorated as the *Song of Deborah and Barak* (5:1-31).

- c. *Samson* judged Israel near the end of that era. He was succeeded by Eli and Samuel, who, being the last judge in Israel, served as the transition into the Israelite monarchy. (It was Samuel who anointed both Saul and David as Israel's king.) Other than perhaps Samuel, the Scripture gives greater attention to Samson's life than any of Israel's judges. That account is recorded in Judges 13-16, and Samson's story is remarkable on many fronts.

First of all, Samson was uniquely distinguished from birth. He was conceived miraculously in a barren womb, and God directed that he be permanently consecrated as a *Nazirite* (ref. Numbers 6:1-21; cf. also 1 Samuel 1:1-11; Acts 18:18). Samson's consecration reflected God's intent that he be His instrument for initiating Israel's deliverance from the mighty Philistine kingdom (Judges 13:1-5). From birth, Samson was "holy to the Lord," and yet he pursued his own interests as he came of age; set apart by Yahweh to liberate Israel from the Philistine yoke, Samson was determined to yoke himself to a Philistine wife. He spurned his consecration and his God, but Yahweh's will stood fast (14:1-4). Samson's self-indulgence cost him dearly, but he yet fulfilled his calling – not as a mighty warrior, but a broken man drawing on the Lord's provision (16:1-31).

- d. *Jephthah* is the fourth man mentioned by the writer, and he, too, was a judge in Israel. The account of Jephthah's life is found in Judges 11-12, and he stands out among Israel's judges as the son of a harlot (11:1) and a man whose younger years were marred by intemperate and ungodly conduct and personal associations (11:2-3). But he is most known for his oath that had such grave implications for his own daughter. Before going into battle against the Ammonites, Jephthah pledged to Yahweh that, if He granted him victory, he would give to Him in a burnt offering the first thing that came from his house when he returned from the battlefield (11:30-31). He never imagined that he'd be offering his daughter and only child, and yet Jephthah didn't waver when he was confronted with that obligation. And neither did his daughter; both were fully committed to honoring the Lord by carrying out the vow (11:34-36).

It's difficult to know whether the Hebrews writer was associating Jephthah's faith with this act or his courageous defeat of the Ammonites. Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with this story, and some Christian (and Jewish) traditions have taught that Jephthah fulfilled his vow, not by killing his daughter (Torah forbid human sacrifice), but by consecrating her to the Lord. This view finds support in the Hebrew concept of the *holah* ("burnt offering"), but also in the daughter's petition to be allowed to mourn for two months over her virginity (11:37-38). It's certainly possible she was lamenting going to her death without having known a husband. But the context supports the conclusion that she was mourning her *perpetual* virginity, because her life going forward was to be fully consecrated to the Lord. Thus the writer's commentary in 11:39: "*And it came about at the end of two months that she returned to her father, who did to her according to the vow which he had made; and she had no relations with a man.*"

Even assuming this outcome, Jephthah still seems an unlikely choice for the Hebrews writer. In addition to his strange vow, Jephthah also went to war against his fellow Israelites (men from the tribe of Ephraim) when they confronted him about the Ammonites (Judges 12:1-6). The text suggests that this was a defensive war, and yet Jephthah's forces ended up killing 42,000 men of Ephraim. But in the end, Jephthah must be regarded as a man of faith; after all, didn't Yahweh set him apart and empower him with His Spirit to judge His people Israel (11:29)? And yet, there are others among the judges who would seem to be more obvious choices for a roll-call of faith. Why not Deborah or Othniel, Caleb's nephew?

But perhaps Jephthah's flaws were precisely the reason he was chosen. The Hebrews author was writing to encourage his readers to persevere in faith as they struggled against their own weakness, doubt and fear. What better way to encourage them than to highlight the triumphal faith of weak and flawed men – men whom they and all Jews celebrated? These had triumphed, not because of anything in themselves, but because they entrusted themselves and the course of their lives to the God who is ever-faithful, the God whose purposes and promises stand. This is the God whose determinations had now become yes and amen in the Messiah – the One to whom these Hebrews had entrusted themselves in faith.