

Title: Them, Him and Us  
Date: January 21, 2018  
Subject: Living by faith  
Scripture: Hebrews 11:32 - 12:4

I like to imagine what it was like for the first hearers to receive what are now books of the Bible. We have the considerable advantage of having printed copies. You can follow along if you'd like, starting with Hebrews 11:32.

The book of Hebrews first arrived as a letter to a local group of Christ followers. Since there was only one copy, someone would read it to the rest. Perhaps news of the letter's arrival from someone, unknown to us but known to them, was spread around the Christian community encouraging everyone to be there when the momentous communication was read. The church met in anticipation of what they would hear.

By this point in the letter they'd have been listening for 40 minutes if there weren't interruptions for questions or discussion. It wasn't like Nate when he memorized Hebrews for quizzing. He could quote aloud chapter 1 in 15 seconds, not that you could understand much of what he said at warp speed. I'm sure the reader read at a speed that people could comprehend what was being read.

The first listeners heard about Jesus – the one who is God, his superiority to angels, who became a human and provided a sacrifice that was sufficiently abundant to take care of their sin problem. There were strong encouragements mixed with warnings. Some of the folks may still have been pondering what they heard, like the ability to access the presence of God in the Most Holy Place.

Their collective ear perked up as reader read about faith. I can imagine it felt like a pep rally or a game where your team is piling on the points. They may have felt like coming out of their chairs, if they had them to sit on. At least there would have been some head nods and muffled Amens as Old Testament heroes were brought to the fore – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses, the parting of the Red Sea, the walls of Jericho a'tumbling down, Rahab.

Maybe they felt as if they were coming out of their skin or high fived as they envisioned what the Lord had done. Then they heard "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets." People were thinking, "This is so good. It can't get any better." But it did.

"Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions (that was Daniel a voice came from the back), quenched the fury of the flames

(Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego called out another), and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”

That just about did it. There may have been shouts, “Our God Reigns, Praise the Lord, Hallelujah. What a fantastic God we serve! Let’s get out there and do this!”

The reader motions for quiet as he tries to hold back the crowd’s growing enthusiasm and his. The reader read it again. “Women -- received back their dead, -- raised to life again” and launched into the next part in what he assumed would continue the same triumphant note, “Others were tortured and...refused...to...be...released...” His eyes and his lips had gotten ahead of his mind.

There was a catch in his throat and a change of tone as he started over. “Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death 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, and in caves and holes in the ground.”

“The world was not worthy of them.” What an intriguingly bold assertion! The world wasn’t fit for the likes of these true heroes of the faith because it was so beneath people of their caliber. They possessed valor, courage, endurance, perseverance, true might, and above all, faithfulness to God. Their out-of-place character caused one person to conclude, “There is a rightness in the removal of such people from the world” (Charles Pfeiffer, the epistle to the Hebrews, p. 105). The right thing was that these people be removed from the world so they didn’t have to live in it as it wasn’t a suitable place for them to live.

This declaration that the world was not worthy of them naturally leads to questions. Is the world worthy of us? Are we worthy of the world? Are we and the world a perfect fit? If it isn’t and we aren’t then praise the Lord. We are just like other people who live by faith. But for those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ who are a good fit for the world, shame on them and me and us if I am, if we are, when I am, when we are. It’s a call to change.

Micah Tyler song, “I wanna be different. I wanna be changed. 'Til all of me is gone And all that remains Is a fire so bright The whole world can see That there's something different. So come and be different In me” (Different).

Here’s the reassuring part. “These were all -- both those who received incredible, mind-boggling blessings and those who seemingly received the back of the hand and worse – commended for their faith. Yet

none of them received what had been promised. God has planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” The something better that involved them and us after the cross.

The reader continued, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.” People may have thought the logical step would be a call to praise the Lord, rejoice in all that he has graciously provided and is providing and will provide. Totally appropriate but not pertinent at the moment.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sins that so easily entangles.” “Everything that hinders.” Not one thing, though that would be a good start. Not a couple of things. But everything.

God isn’t looking down from heaven, but from residing in our hearts when he asks “What are the things that are hindering you as a follower of my Son Jesus Christ? What attitudes? What thoughts? What actions? Before completely answering that, what is the sin that easily entangles you?”

The main sins of American Christians are routinely recognized as laziness, lust, materialism, apathy, complacency, neglect, busyness, misplaced priorities, pride, self-sufficiency, selfishness, superiority, anger.

On Thursday the district superintendent of the Alliance churches in Wisconsin and the U P was here. The last time Jeff Brown came, the holding tank froze up. It’s still working. He came to talk with the area Alliance pastors about the necessity of soul care. Here’s some of what he said, “God deeply cares for your soul. Do you? Intimacy with Jesus is not a means to get stuff from a genie. We’re as godly, as holy as we want to be.” He addressed the issue of priorities by asking “if anyone had ever heard of someone saying that they have just been so busy that they don’t have time for FaceBook, or texting, or tweeting, or talking on the phone that day or week. (We could add other things like gaming, family, work, TV, movies.) People find time for what they want. If the devil can’t make you sin, he will make you busy because either way, your soul will shrivel.”

I heard a radio commercial (It’s Just Lunch) a while back that had an interesting tag line. “Busy people complain about what little time they have. Productive people make time for what’s important.”

The next line from the reader, “And let us run with perseverance.” Some of them were tempted to drop out from following Christ, to give in to the pressure and turn back to trusting in what they did before Christ came into their life. The listeners understood that they were in a loooooong distance race and needed to keep on persevering. They had done so in the early days of their faith but now things were getting harder and the realization of hoped for ends seemed distant. Persevere!

If the lessons from these people aren’t sufficient to get to hearers to move toward Christ, think about the Savior Himself. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...” Why would we want to get to know him better? It’s not like Jesus did anything special like saving us from our sins and a life in hell

or anything like that...I'm being facetious. Why wouldn't we want to get to know him better? He lived a perfect life. He delivered unsurpassed teaching. He possessed a perfect character. He demonstrated marvelous love. He selflessly served. He died a sacrificial death and he rose in resurrection power so that we could have eternal life. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. He wrote the story. He is the finisher. He completes it. There's nothing more that can or should be added, no missing pieces to find. It's all there, or right here in this book.

Reading books about the Bible, hearing other people share what they've learned about Christ from the Bible and listening to Christian music are great, but they aren't a substitute for the real thing. It's the difference from eating a full-fledged Thanksgiving dinner with turkey, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, cranberries, green bean casserole and pumpkin pie or watching Food Network's Alton Brown discuss turkey carving principles while you spray holiday scented room freshener. The second can provide sensory enjoyment and some mental enlightenment but not the real thing into your stomach. We need the real thing of eating God's Word for ourselves. If you aren't reading the Bible for yourself, how can we help you find the time, provide tips?

We are to focus on building our relationships with him. Sometimes it's termed as intimacy with Jesus or soul care. Dallas Willard, Christian philosopher, wrote extensively on spiritual formation (*Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God*, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*). He said, "The main thing God gets out of your life is not the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become. That is also the main thing you get out of your life." God is interested in the relationships we have with him.

We build relationships by talking and listening. The same is true with God. We talk with God through prayer and listen to God talk with us through the Bible. Ask the Holy Spirit fill and refill us.

The example of Jesus is meant to fortify us. "Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men." He is the supreme example and testimony of how to endure, persevere. He lived a life of faith that resembles that of the unnamed saints who suffered horribly. We don't fully know the depth of the horrors Jesus faced when he died on the cross. It wasn't just the physical torture, but the emotional, psychological and spiritual tortures as he took on our sin, became sin and received our punishment (2 Corinthians 5:21). He went through extreme shame and suffering because he kept in front of him the joy of the heavenly reward he'd get. We're to be encouraged and challenged as we recall his work on the cross, His love for us and that we'll get the reward at the end. Think about Jesus who went through all that he did "so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

The caution sign is thrown up as two problems are identified. The first is a sudden breakdown while the second is a gradual collapse. The song Slow Fade (Casting Crowns) calls out a caution to our thoughts, choices, what we see, what we hear. “People never crumble in a day. It's a slow fade.”

George MacDonald, author and poet who influenced C.S. Lewis, “A man may sink by such slow degrees that, long after he is a devil, he may go on being a good churchman or a good dissenter, and thinking himself a good Christian!” (*George MacDonald: An Anthology* by C.S. Lewis, p.118). C.S. Lewis, “The safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” (*The Screwtape Letters*, in *A C.S. Lewis Treasury: Three Classics in One Volume*, p. 250).

I struggled with how to understand verse 4. READ. It’s a comparison between us and them. It refers back to the example of those who by faith lived and died. It’s a reminder of how relatively easy it was/is for those who haven’t had to die for their faith.

“In the struggle against sin.” Life in this world means there’ll be a struggle, a life and death struggle. Some want the Christian experience to be like a fully gifted Disneyland trip – no expenses to pay, no worries, nothing to make feel bad, all is gum drops and princesses. And it’s all fantasyland too. Here’s how the Bible phrases the struggle if we put Satan as the speaker, “I have come to steal, kill and destroy. I’m your enemy who prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (John 10:10, 1 Peter 5:8). Sounds scary and it should. We’re feeding right into the devil’s hands if not working on relationship with Jesus.

The great Moses struggled against sin. READ 11:25, 26.

Moses had all the luxuries of the greatest world power at his disposal. He was heir to the throne and the unlimited authority and incredible wealth that came with it. He decided to turn his back on the things of this world and the pleasures they afford. The sake of Christ was more valuable though he could only faintly and indistinctly see.

People have a choice. We don’t have to take God’s Word to heart. We don’t have to pay attention to Jesus. We can even go so far as to become the prodigal and eat the world’s garbage. Some will do that because it seems like fun at the moment. Though they might have temporary exhilaration, it will only add more misery. There’ll be more gnawing at the soul. People are free to do so. People have a choice – to look away from Jesus or look to him.