

Text: Hebrews 11:32-40  
 Title: Holding On With Flawed Faith  
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 Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

Does God use people with flawed, stumbling, up & down faith? Not only does he use them, he celebrates them!

The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews contains a catalogue of the some of the greatest heroes of faith the Bible has to offer. The names he mentions are intended to inspire us to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The major luminaries include Noah, Abraham and Moses. But as the writer comes to the end of his catalogue, he squeezes in a few more names. He wrote...

**<sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> 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.**

**<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. <sup>37</sup> 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— <sup>38</sup> the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.**

**<sup>39</sup> These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup> God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.**<sup>1</sup>

What do you know about “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets”? The writer of Hebrews mentions these names only briefly because he’s sure his readers will know them. Do you? What can they teach us about enduring faith?

You probably know something about **Gideon**. He’s a popular Old Testament character and you can read his story in The Book of Judges, chapters 6 & 7. God came to him and called him to lead Israel to defeat invaders of Israel called the Midianites. Gideon called for volunteers and 32,000 men responded. But

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, c1984), Heb 11:32-40.

God reduced the number down to 300 and Gideon led them in a tremendous victory of an enormous army of invaders.

In fact, each of the people mentioned by the writer of Hebrews overcame overwhelming odds to win a victory for God's people. You probably know a lot about **David**, the king of Israel. You can read his story in 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel. As a boy, he was led by God to defeat the giant of the Philistines, Goliath, using only a sling and stone. And then later as king he led Israel to defeat many nations that threatened God's people.

You probably know something about **Samson**. His story is told in Judges chapters 13 to 16. God gave him the gift of great strength and he used it to defeat Israel's enemies.

And **Samuel**, you probably know something about him. There are two books of the Bible named after him – 1 & 2 Samuel. He was the first of the prophets and a man revered in Israel. As a boy, he heard God's voice calling him in the night and he immediately responded in obedience. That simple trust in God came to be a characteristic of his lifetime of ministry.

But what do you know about **Barak**? Or **Jephthah**? Let me briefly introduce you to these two heroes of faith.

**Jephthah** was a serious problem for me when I was in high school.

In high school I had one of those teachers who had become a bitter opponent of the Christian faith because of some bad past experience. He had at one time been in training for the ministry but was now a committed cynic. One day, in class, as we were discussing religious issues, he challenged me with the question: "**What kind of a God asks a man to sacrifice his own child?**" I thought he was referring to the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 where God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and then stopped him before he did it and provided an animal for the sacrifice. And so I confidently defended God's integrity, referencing the story of Abraham. "No," he said, "I'm not talking about Abraham. I'm talking about Jephthah in the Book of Judges. Don't you know about Jephthah?" I didn't. I was completely caught off guard. I didn't know what to say. My confidence evaporated.

Jephthah, the Bible says, was "a mighty warrior" (Judges 11:1) and like Gideon, God asked him to lead Israel against two nations which were oppressing them, the nations of the Amorites and the Ammonites. However, before meeting his enemies in battle, Jephthah made this vow to the Lord:

**"If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." Judges 11:30-31**

Jephthah fought the Ammonites and the Lord gave him a great victory. But when he returned home, what should come out of his door, leading the victory procession, but his one and only child, his daughter. He was distraught! What was he to do? He had made a vow to the Lord and he believed he could not break it. But his daughter said to him:

**“My father ... you have given your word to the LORD. Do to me just as you promised, now that the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites.” Judges 11:36**

She asked for two months to travel and say farewell to her friends. After two months, she returned and...

**“he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin.” Judges 11:39**

There are just three things I want to say about Jephthah.

**First**, my high school teacher’s question was wrong. God never asked Jephthah to kill his child! God never asked him to make this vow nor do I believe did God desire it to be fulfilled once it had been made. What Jephthah made was a rash, unwise vow and God’s Law contains provision for the nullification such an unwise commitment. (Numbers 30:6-8) **But if we do make a vow to God, and if it’s in our power to keep it, we had better take it seriously!**

**Second**, did Jephthah kill his daughter? Bible scholars are divided on whether Jephthah put her to death or whether he put her away as a perpetual virgin to remain unmarried and childless until her death. Since she was his one and only child, her death, either immediately or eventually, would mean the end of Jephthah’s family line. But it is very possible that he did put her to death. But not because God commanded him to do so, but simply because of his own misguided zeal. **But what zeal! Jephthah’s commitment to God was so intense he was willing to sacrifice his own daughter and his own future.**

**Third**, I appeal to Bible teachers -- please tell the story to kids. **Don’t pull back from the hard parts of the Bible.** By the time I was in high school I should have encountered this story and been challenged by this man’s misguided zeal for the Lord. He was a man who trusted God to give him a tremendous victory against great odds and God was faithful to his promise. But Jephthah was also a man of impetuous passion who let his emotions get the better of him! **He was a man of faith – but he was a man of flawed faith that God used to accomplish a great victory.**

And that brings me to **Barak**.

Again, the situation was that Israel was being oppressed by a foreign army – this time it was the Canaanite army under the leadership of a general named Sisera. In those days, Israel was being led by a prophetess by the name of Deborah and the Lord directed her to call Barak to lead the armies of God against the Canaanites. She said to him:

**"The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: `Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead the way to Mount Tabor. I will lure Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.'" Judges 4:6-7**

Barak responded to this direct, clear, prophetic word from the Lord with something that sounds like it came right out of my Junior High schoolyard:

**"Barak said to her, `If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go.'" Judges 4:8**

Those are the words of a hero of the faith, aren't they?! ***"If you go, I'll go."*** This is the declaration of a man willing to lash himself to the mast and face the storm, isn't it?! ***"If you go, I'll go."***

Deborah told him that she would go with him, but because of his mealy-mouthed cowardice, she told him that the honour for the victory would not be his **"for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman."** (Judges 4:9) **OUCH!** That was a crusher for a man in that culture! It was like calling somebody today a "whimpering momma's boy" or a "spineless weenie."

BUT Barak did take the 10,000 men of Naphtali & Zebulun and led them against Sisera's forces. And despite his initial cowardice, what made his action courageous and an example of faith, was that Israel was armed only with swords and spears while Sisera had 900 iron chariots – that's the modern equivalent of an entire army of tanks! But Israel routed the Canaanites, they abandoned their chariots and ran and Israel pursued them, killing the entire army, except Sisera.

Sisera ran and came to the tent of a woman by the name of Jael. Exhausted, Sisera asked for shelter and some water. Jael provided him with a drink, covered him with a blanket, waited till he fell asleep ... and then drove a tent peg through his head! When Barak eventually caught up with Sisera, Jael showed him her handiwork – and the fulfillment of Deborah's prophecy.

Barak was a man of **flawed faith** used by God to accomplish a great victory. Do you see a pattern yet?

**In fact, every one of the people that the writer of Hebrews mentions here in verse 32 as a hero of the faith was a hero with flawed faith!**

**Gideon** – was fearful and wouldn't act on God's commission until God had given him several signs giving him an ironclad guarantee that he would be given the victory over the Midianites. But in the end, Gideon led the army in victory.

**Samson** – was completely lacking in self-control and unable to restrain his passion for women and pleasure and that was his undoing. But in the end, he trusted God and gained the victory over the Philistines.

**David** – committed adultery and murder, but repented and returned to his trust in God. God gave him many victories.

**Samuel** – was a great man but even he had his weakness. At the end of his life, he appointed his own sons to be leaders in Israel but they abused their positions of authority, and Samuel did nothing about it. (1 Samuel 8:1ff)

**But all these flawed heroes of the faith were given as an illustration to what the writer of Hebrews describes so glowingly in verses 33 to 34...**

These are the heroes of the faith who “conquered kingdoms, administered justice ... shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames...escaped the edge of the sword ... became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies...

**“Whose weakness was turned to strength;” Hebrews 11:34**

Let me ask you: *Is your faith flawed?* Let me answer my own question for you: *Yes, it is!*

Can God still use you? Let me answer that one, too: *Of course He can!*

Several centuries ago, John Calvin wrote this about the lesson we take from these “heroes of flawed faith”:

***“In every saint there is always something reprehensible. Nevertheless, although faith may be imperfect and incomplete it does not cease to be approved by God. There is no reason, therefore, why the fault from which we labour should break us or discourage us provided we go on by faith in the race of our calling.”*** (as quoted in Hughes, [Hebrews vol. 2](#), p. 150)

God uses stumbling, flawed, weak believers to accomplish His work in the world. In other words, He uses you and me – *if we just keep on going with Him!* He loves to turn our weakness to strength!

Mark Buchanan tells the story of a couple from his church, Gary & Elaine, who came to him for guidance and encouragement.

- They had run a Christian counseling service in the community for 9 years
- Many lives had been changed and helped

- BUT a change in government policy meant that a large portion of their revenue had been cut off overnight – they would have to close their counseling business and probably even sell their house.

- They were broken hearted – “What was God doing in all this? Had God abandoned them?”

- They met for lunch but Buchanan groped for words to say

- They had to be back in the office for a 12:30 appointment and it was now 12:20 Mark felt he was sending them away empty handed and so he made one last attempt to find some word of hope.

“Gary, you’ve done a lot of things in your life. It’s not like this is all you know how to do.”

“Yes,” Gary said, “I’ve done many things.” He listed some of the many hats he’d worn: he had a commercial pilot’s license; he’d been an airplane mechanic, a schoolteacher, a pastor and church planter and had run a design and construction company.

“In fact,” Gary said, “that’s how I was able to support Elaine when we were first married and planting a church. Do you know that Elaine and I started the very first church in Whistler, B.C?”

“Are you talking about the little A-frame church that sat right under the gondola?”

“Yes.”

“Gary,” Buchanan said, “this is amazing. I went there, several times. I was a pagan. I didn’t have the slightest interest in church. But I was a fanatic for skiing, and every weekend my best friend’s father drove us up to Whistler on the condition that we attend the chapel service with him at the end of the day. I have to admit: I didn’t listen to a word.... You must have know the people who hosted us in their chalet... My friend’s father set it up. It was someone involved in that church. My brother, my friend and I stayed in someone’s cabin for a weekend.”

“That was probably Bill and Gloria’s place. They hosted a lot of people.”

“Yeah, maybe. It was quite large.”

“No, Bill & Gloria’s place wasn’t too large.”

“Well, this place was a good size,” Buchanan said. “It was right next door to the cabin owned by a lady named Karen who had a yoga show on television.”

Gary & Elaine’s eyes flew open!

“That was our place,” they said together.

Then Buchanan found the words he'd been searching for to encourage Gary & Elaine. He told them that...

- One weekend when he was staying with them, they had invited him to attend a Bible study in their living room – he declined and went to his room
- He had to go to the washroom and when he came out, he didn't head straight back to his room – he hid behind a wall and eavesdropped on their Bible study
- He told them that he overheard a man's voice "speaking encouragement to the group, telling of God's strange choreography, His hidden providence, the way He sculpted purpose out of anything, everything, nothing: failure, detour, disappointment, duty, waiting. He told how God had done this with him recently. He believed that God had called him to be a missions pilot, and so went through all the time and expense of getting his commercial pilot's license. Afterward, though, he couldn't get work anywhere – just one closed door after the next. But that led, through a series of interconnected events, to the work he did now. 'I believe,' the man said, 'that I never would have ended up a pastor and church planter if God hadn't first opened up the door for me to be a pilot, and then shut it hard.'

"Gary," Buchanan enquired, "that was you, wasn't it?"

His eyes were silvery with tears, "Yes," he said....

"Gary, I couldn't let [what you said] go. I had never heard that before. I had never even conceived of it: God cares about ... me. Five years after that, I came to faith in Christ. Today, I'm your pastor, Gary, Elaine, in part because of a conversation I overheard twenty-five years ago about a God who wastes nothing and who loves intimately."

"It was 12:30, and they had to go. But I watched Gary and Elaine leave, and their leaving was different than their coming. They had almost crawled into that restaurant. But now a hurricane wouldn't have been able to knock them down ...." (Mark Buchanan, Things Unseen, p. 115-121)

Sometimes the victory of faith is visible in this world! And sometimes it is only visible in the next world. Sometimes...

**"Women received back their dead, raised to life again." While... "Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection." Hebrews 11:35**

Some were resuscitated. Others were resurrected. Both were "by faith." What's made the difference? Their faith? No. It was the sovereign plan of God. Some receive a partial victory in this life but it isn't the final victory. Those brought back

from the dead, like Lazarus, would only die some other day. But those who die and gain the “better resurrection” never die again! That’s the real victory!

Hyung Goo Kim was a Christian who died in 1995. He knew he was dying. His wife, Margaret, tells the story of how they prepared for his death.

**“We made wills, we met a funeral director, and we bought a cemetery plot. We decided that we wanted the stone marker on his grave already there when he was buried, and so we selected a stone and had it engraved and set in place... When we visited the cemetery to see my husband’s newly laid gravestone, we took a picture of him next to [it]. He is sitting cross-legged on the ground, looking straight into the camera, and in front of him is a flat stone with the [inscription], ‘I know that my redeemer liveth,’ and under it his name and the year of his birth, with a space next to it for the year of his death. It is a photograph at once macabre, and darkly funny and soberly realistic. He is dying and he knows it and he also knows that his redeemer lives and that he is soon to see him face to face. Isn’t this how a Christian ought to live, and ought to die?”** (as quoted in Buchanan, *Things Unseen*, p. 202)

There’s this idea floating around the Christian world today that if you just apply the right “faith” to a problem, you will always “gain the victory.” You’ll always be healed. You’ll always be hired. You’ll always be prosperous. Your marriage will always be saved. Your children will always come to know Christ.

Try to explain that idea to those who “through faith” (v.33), “faced jeers and flogging,” to those who “were chained and put in prison.” To those who “were stoned...were sawed in two...were put to death by the sword.” To those who “went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated... living in holes in the ground.” Explain that idea to these people about whom God says “the world was not worthy of them.”

**“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” Hebrews 11:39-40**

**Some** of them saw partial victory in this life, **some** of them didn’t even see that in this life but here’s what’s interesting -- **none** of them received what had been promised.” They were **all** waiting for “something better.”

That “something better” is where our **better** and lasting possessions” (Hebrews 10:34) are found – heaven!

Heaven is the **“better country,”** the “heavenly one” that awaits us. (Hebrews 11:16)

It's the life that awaits us after the "**better resurrection**" (Hebrews 11:35) that brings us a life that will never end and will never disappoint.

It's that transforming moment when we leave this life and are united with Christ "which is **better by far.**" (Philippians 1:23)

There are times when the flags fly in victory in this life. Life does have its joys. God can bring resuscitation to dead lives in both a literal and figurative sense – he can bring dead bodies to life and he can breathe life into dead souls. He can repay us for the years the locusts have eaten. (Joel 2:25) As He did with Job, he can bless the latter part of our lives more than the first. (Job 42:12) But at best, this life can only contain a partial victory. **He's planned "something better" for us.**

Mark Buchanan tells another the story, this one about a friend of his, a man named Eugene. Eugene came home one day to find his house cleaned out. His wife had left and taken their two-year old daughter, Heather, with her. All she left was a note explaining that she had been having an affair with his best friend and that she'd gone to be with him. She left no forwarding address. She, this man and his daughter vanished.

Night after night for months Eugene drove the streets looking for them but his search was in vain. He would come home after each attempt and fall on his face and weep and beg God.

Finally, Eugene found them but his wife refused to return. Through legal maneuvers, she gained exclusive custody of their daughter, who was by then four. The man she'd run off with adopted Heather and they never told her of Eugene's existence. When Heather was eight, her mother died, and the last link Eugene had with his daughter was broken. Eugene lost his little girl. For twenty years Eugene prayed for her but never saw her.

In time, Eugene met a lovely woman with two girls and they married and adopted a son together. They built a beautiful home and a good life together.

On Eugene's fiftieth birthday, Heather came back into his life. Although she lives hundreds of miles away, they have extended visits together. She and Eugene's wife are friends – Heather calls her "mom."

The second Christmas after Heather came back she shyly showed him her credit card. "What's this?" he asked. "Look at the name," she said. She had changed her last name. It was the same as his.

There has been a lot of healing for Eugene, but there remains a deep pain in their relationship. As Buchanan puts it,

**“There are all the years that his daughter went to bed, maybe sucking a thumb and clutching a favorite blanket, when he was not there to read her a story, tuck her in, kiss her. He didn’t get to teach her how to ride a bicycle. He wasn’t there to look stern and menacing and his trembling inside the night she went on her first date. He wasn’t there to tell her about God – His infinite bigness and yet the way He becomes small – and he wasn’t there to take her to church and hold her hand as they sang “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” and now she has little interest in either God or church. He missed all that, and she did to, and they can’t get it back.”** (*Things Unseen*, p. 86)

There is a partial victory for Eugene now. But there is still the longing for “something better.” The Bible promises that in heaven “there will no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

How can this be? Buchanan asks. Are our memories wiped clean? Or do we finally see things from God’s perspective and get an answer to our “why” question? Maybe, he suggests.

Or maybe in heaven, he writes, **“all our losses are not forgotten. Maybe they’re returned. Maybe all the broken and strewn parts of ourselves come back, more alive and connected than they’ve ever been. But regardless of that, this one thing is true: Heaven is where our inescapable sense of loss and incompleteness is overcome. It is the one thing large enough to answer our deepest longings and console our deepest griefs. Our hunger for perfect justice and perfect mercy and perfect joy and perfect peace – all is met there.**

**“Maybe, just maybe,”** Buchanan wrote, **“the sorrow is not forgotten, or bathed in the light of perfect understanding. Maybe all of it, every last shred of it, is redeemed, given back. And [maybe] Eugene gets to tuck Heather into bed, and sing her a lullaby.”** (*Things Unseen*, p. 87)

God has “something better” planned for Eugene. He has something better planned for you and me, too. For ordinary, flawed, stumbling heroes of faith who simply hold on to His promise.

Put your trust in God, hold on and allow Him to turn your weakness into strength.

## **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**

**Final Song:** *By Faith*

**Benediction**