

Leadership Letter 22

(Note: this is the 22nd in a series of "Leadership Letters." You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org and look under the "encouragement" section.)

Overcoming Overwhelming Odds

It has been said that a Christian is always triumphant, continually joyful, and always in trouble! We all face trials. And at times, the difficulties mount higher and higher until we think we will be overcome by their sheer weight.

But it is in those real-life situations that God involves Himself in our lives. C. S. Lewis said, *"Difficulties are God's megaphone to get our attention. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world!"*

There were a group of believers in the first century A.D. who were in the midst of fierce struggles: their lives had been turned upside down by the fires of persecution. They had lost homes, possessions and jobs. Their friends had deserted them. Some had their families torn apart by the fierceness of the persecution. Others had become martyrs. They were facing overwhelming odds.

It was to these people that God penned a letter of encouragement: the letter to the Hebrews. We don't even know who wrote the letter, but we can identify with it.

An Understanding of the Trials

Read Hebrews 10:32-34. What had happened to these Jewish Christians?

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (NIV)

Notice in verses 33 and 34 the four dimensions of suffering:

- Reproaches - They were the objects of disgrace and verbal abuse through the caustic remarks off others' tongues.
- Tribulations - Pressure from the overt actions of others. This could include both physical and emotional abuse.
- Indirect Suffering - They had become sharers with others who were ill treated.
- The Loss of Valuable Possessions - Their property, health, possessions and freedom were taken away.

How would you feel if all this happened to you? How would you respond? In verse 33, it says they were made *"a public spectacle . . ."* Their struggles and trials were put on display for all the world to see and to mock.

Hudson Taylor once said, *"It doesn't matter where the pressure comes from - only where it lies: whether it separates you from God or drives you closer to Him."*

Do you know what was happening to these believers? Read verse 35. *"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded."* They were being challenged by their circumstances ... but God was using it to purify them and prepare them for better things.

What did they need? Verse 36 says, *"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."*

The Greek word translated "endurance" is *hupomeno*. It is made up of two root words: *hupo*, meaning "under," and *meno*, meaning "remain." To endure literally means to remain under, to stay put, to not give up. The author reminds them of three motivating factors in this test of endurance:

- Their Future rewards (v.36)

"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

- The second coming of Christ (v.37)

"For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay."

- The pleasure of God (v.38)

"But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."

cf. Matthew 25:21 *"Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master."*

Take a minute to reflect on this question: Which of those three motivating factors serves to best motivate you to hang in there when things get tough? Why?

Verse 38 is actually a quotation from the Old Testament book of Habakkuk (2:4). That verse is quoted again in two other portions of the New Testament – Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.

The opposite of endurance (*hupomeno*) is the word in verse 38 translated *"shrinks back."* It is the word *hupostello*. It begins with the same prefix, *hupo*, but now is added the word *stello*. It means *"to retreat, to shrink back, to escape, to find a way out."* Instead of "remaining under," some were "shrinking back" from the trials.

The writer is assured (v.39) that they will not shrink back, however. *"But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."* The reason he had such confidence in the reality and quality of their spiritual lives was that he knew them. He knew what God had previously done in their lives. And he knew that God was faithful to complete that work – 1 Thessalonians 5:24 states, *"The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."*

Hebrews 10:32-39 forms the bridge to chapter 11, the “famous faith” chapter of the Bible. Here, many of the Old Testament saints are paraded before us as examples of common men (and women) with uncommon faith.

We'll look more at the subject of faith in future Leadership Letters, but for a few minutes, read Hebrews 11:1-6. Take a few moments and jot down some observations that you make from this passage about what faith really is like.

¹ Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ⁴ By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (NIV)

Early in my Christian life, I remember hearing a speaker ask a couple of penetrating questions. He asked, *If faith were the topic of conversation in your dorm, school, business or neighborhood, would your name be brought up as an example of a man or woman of faith? If Hebrews 11 were to be updated in heaven, would your name be in the list as one of the heroes of the faith today?*

How would you respond to those questions?

Conclusion

As I close this letter, I would like to encourage you to become a man or a woman of faith. Would you do that? It simply starts with a choice: a choice to believe the God of the universe and take Him at His Word.

Finally, let me give you a couple of books for suggested reading that might supplement in this area. Henry Cloud's book, *When Your World Makes No Sense*, (Oliver Nelson Publishers), is excellent, as well as Phillip Yancey's *Disappointment with God* and *Where is God When It Hurts* (both published by Zondervan).