

“WHAT FAITH!”
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Hebrews 11:1-3, 6; Mark 12:41-44
November 6 & 7, 2021

I want to begin today with an extreme example of faith for us to consider. It comes out of the country of Tajikistan.

“For months, Munira had tried to keep her faith a secret; she loved her family so much and had no desire to hurt them. But when her father made arrangements for Munira to marry, she told them of her love for Christ Jesus.

“[But obviously her father was not happy with her decision. He said to her,] ‘Munira, you have five minutes before I kill you. Whom do you choose – your family or Jesus?’

“Munira was down to her last ounce of faith. **She answered her father, ‘I must choose Jesus.’** He was so enraged that his beautiful daughter would turn against the family by denying her Islamic upbringing in Tajikistan that he beat her for another two hours.

“But God intervened. A Christian friend took her to safety for a period of time. Munira said, ‘During my time away, God revealed His faithfulness to me, and after much prayer, I knew it was time to reconcile with my beloved family.’

“When she returned home, everyone was happy except her father. His first words were, ‘I hate you! Get out! My daughter died three months ago!’

“Devastated, Munira wept at her father’s feet saying, ‘My God told me to come back to you. I will never leave you, even if you beat and kill me’

“Her father broke down and hugged Munira. He soon resigned himself to her new faith and even agreed to let her attend Bible College.

“Some readers get so caught up in a story that they read ahead to see what will happen. They skip one chapter ahead or maybe turn to the back of the book. They simply must know if the hero wins out in the end. They need to see if everything will work out as planned.

“Unfortunately, you can’t read ahead in your life’s story. Like Munira, you must take it one

chapter, one day at a time. Like her, you will not be disappointed in the results [if you remain faithful to Jesus]. Are you anxious to see where your obedience will lead? Do you want to find out what God has planned for you next? **The best you can do is to obey today, and leave tomorrow to God.**¹

That is the mystery of faith. We don't know what will happen to us today, or tomorrow, or any time in the future. And as nerve wracking as that can be sometimes, it is our obedience to Jesus Christ that will determine the outcome of that future.

And we see that in our Scripture lessons for today. As we read in the Old Testament lesson of the Book of Ruth, Ruth did not know what was in store for her. Her life seemed to be going pretty well. She married, Mahlon, the son of Elimelech, and life was good. But, then things started to turn up-side-down. First her father-in-law, Elimelech, died. Life was different, but still good, and for the next ten years she lived near her mother-in-law, Naomi, supporting her and encouraging her beyond the death of Elimelech. However, when her husband, Mahlon, and her brother-in-law, Kilion, died soon after each other, everything changed. What were they to do?

Naomi, decided to return to Judea after God had brought relief from the famine in the land. She and Ruth and Orpah made plans to go back to Bethlehem, where Naomi's family lived. But having only been on the road for a couple of days, Naomi told Ruth and Orpah to return to their homes in Moab. She could not provide them with sons to become married to them, and there was little hope for them in Bethlehem. Things would be better for them if they returned to Moab, to their own people and to their own gods. So Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, and returned home to her people in Moab.

But Ruth decided to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. She told Naomi, "*Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my god. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me*" (Ruth 1:16-67). **Ruth was determined to support and encourage her mother-in-law, even in the face of uncertainty and**

¹ (The Voice of the Martyrs, *Extreme Devotion*, [Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2001] pg. 313)

discouragement. But God intervened, and life changed as Ruth put her faith in the Lord God Almighty.

Not knowing what the future held, Ruth went with Naomi and remained a part of her family. God then led her into the fields of a farmer named Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, gleaning the remnants of the wheat and barley crops left in the fields after the harvesters collected the stalks of grain. And as Boaz was told of Ruth's dedication to Naomi after the deaths of their husbands, he began to protect her and provide for the two of them with the abundance of the grain harvest. Boaz invited Ruth to glean only in his fields so that nothing would happen to her. She followed his invitation and was rewarded with a great deal of wheat and barley to take home to Naomi.

And as we heard in our lesson for today, as the harvest came to a close and the threshing of the grains began, Naomi encouraged Ruth to be bold, to submit herself to Boaz's care, and to sleep at his feet on the threshing floor so that he might spread his cloak on her. And as Boaz learned that it was Ruth at his feet in the middle of the night, he decided to become the "kinsman redeemer" for Naomi and Ruth, buying the land belonging to Elimelech and taking Naomi and Ruth into his household.

The next day he gained approval to become the kinsman redeemer for Naomi and Ruth and boldly proclaimed to the elders and people of Bethlehem, "*Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth, the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses*" (Ruth 4:9-10). "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife" (Ruth 4:13), and they had a son, Obed, who would become the grandfather of King David.

When life looked like it was to be terrible, as Naomi and Ruth continued in their faith in the Lord their God, He led them, provided for them, and blessed them to be in the lineage of not only King David, but also the Lord Jesus Christ. When Naomi thought that the Lord had afflicted her and brought misfortune upon her (1:20-21), she did not waver in her faith, but continued seeking the Lord. Daily faith in the Lord's guidance encouraged her and Ruth to stay true to the Lord. And as a result,

they have become great examples for all of us to remain faithful in all our ways, despite disappointment and grief and uncertainty. The Book of Ruth is a marvelous account of faithfulness and hope in the Lord our God, and we are provided examples of those who found hope for their own lives, coming to the understanding that God can do great things through us, affecting the future, if we live in faith.

And we see a similar pattern in the lesson of Hebrews 11. We have these great words that start out the chapter, *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”* (Heb. 11:1-2). **Though we do not see what we hope for, we trust in the One that we have hope in, the Lord Jesus Christ.** If we were to have received what we hope for, then faith is no longer required. But since there is much that we have not yet received, we build our faith on those things that we hope for, convinced that God can and will supply them, according to His time and following His will.

Though those in the Old Testament record of faith did not have God’s Messiah to put their trust and faith in, they trusted in God the Father, and followed His commands and guidance. As you read through the whole chapter of the roll of the faithful in Hebrews chapter 11, these folks walked in faith according to God’s word, *“...yet none of them received what had been promised”* (Heb. 11:13 & 39). **They did not know the future, but walked in faith each day according to the hope they had in God.** They did not give up, not knowing what might become of them, but they trusted that what God had told them, would indeed happen, even if it was after they finished their lives here on the earth. *“God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”* (Heb. 11:40). God’s plan is achieved as we remain faithful to Him, obeying His Word and leaning on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

And in doing so, we find that God has already prepared a place for us in His house, promised us by Jesus, that we will receive after this life is over (John 14:1-4) if we are faithful to His commands and teachings. But if we do not have faith (Heb. 11:6) we cannot please God because we do not recognize that He even exists. And if we do not recognize that God exists, then we are left to fend for ourselves,

with nothing left to us but our own strength, our own resources and our own wisdom. And those are all limited when they are only from the human perspective.

However, faith in God enables us to see God as He is; the Creator of the Universe, the Mastermind of all life here on the earth, and the Divine Power behind all that happens here on earth. When we come to understand that He is our Higher Power, keeping life going on the earth by the Word of His power, we can then come to understand our need to obey His commandments and follow His teachings. **And as we see God at work in our lives, we grow in our faith that He is God, and we are not, and “*that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him*” (Hebrew 11:6). And Hebrews 11 gives us all of these marvelous examples of people of faith so that we might be encouraged when the bottom seems to have dropped out of our own life. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets all walked in faith, trusting that what God had called them to do would be accomplished if they did not grow weary and lost heart (Heb. 12:3).**

And we see that in our New Testament lesson of the woman at the Temple the day that Jesus spent time watching the crowds. Listen to the faith that this woman had. This is Mark 12:41-44. (READ Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus always exposed the dynamics of this life. When “*many rich people threw in large amounts*” into the Temple treasury, it was not them that Jesus lifted up and blessed (Mk. 12:41). They may have been following the command of the Lord to give of their tithes and offerings, but as Jesus points out to His disciples, “*they all gave out of their wealth...*” (12:44). They still had resources to depend upon after their giving to the Lord. The wealthy had much to their names that they could turn to when they got home. They all had an abundance to keep them alive and well.

But Jesus lifts up this poor widow who came to the Temple to praise God and give thanks to Him for His provision as the one with the greater gift. Why might that be? Well, she did not have other resources to depend upon after going home. She had no bank account, no 401(k), no retirement account that we know of. Jesus describes her as a “*poor widow*,” which means that she had no one to depend

upon in terms of a husband or family. She had very little resources as her own, and she depended upon God to supply the essentials of life's subsistencies. There were not a lot of excesses in her life except maybe struggles and trials. She would not have been able to keep up with the current fashion in clothes. Her home was probably very simple, if not a shack tucked in somewhere in a recess in the city. She probably had little to eat, unless she grew her own, but then it would not be excessive or luxuriant.

Yet, when Jesus saw her put in her offering (probably much more than a tithe), He commends her as being the greatest giver in the Temple. "*She, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on*" (Mk. 12:44). Those two small copper coins were valued less than a penny, yet it was all she had. **Her love for the Lord was demonstrated in her faith**, in that giving all she had to the Lord, she trusted that He would not leave her or abandoned her, but that He would care for her.

Just like Ruth before her, this poor widow trusted in her God, knowing that if she walked in faith on a daily basis, He would provide for her, protect her and leave a legacy through her. **She didn't know what the future would bring, but she put today in the hands of the Lord her God and trusted that He would supply her the daily bread needed to continue to live in praise to Him.**

It is interesting to me that this woman did not ridicule the wealthy, or even demand that others help her out. She did not make a spectacle of herself so as to be noticed. She did not demand to be put on the welfare rolls of the city or country. She did not demand to be treated equally and force the rich to share their wealth with her. She simply came before the Lord with what she had, and in honor of her life given to her by the Lord, presented her small gift in thanksgiving to the Lord, trusting that He would care for her. And Jesus lifts her up as the greatest giver AND the one with the most faith.

You see, when we have all we need, and abundantly more, we tend to only trust in our resources rather than in the One who supplied them to us to be the stewards of them in the first place. We tend to look at what we have been given, rather than looking to the Giver of those things. **When we have great wealth, we tend to miss out on the responsibility that God has given to us to work with those resources to help the poor and the widow and the homeless and the orphan.** We trust in ourselves,

and our faith in the Lord is small. But when we have little, as we have to be careful with all that we have been entrusted with, our faith in the Lord grows greater, and we begin to be more thankful for all that the Lord has provided for us, and we find our dependence upon Him grows.

God loved this poor widow as much as He loved the others in the Temple that day. And we are to be encouraged that God does not overlook the poor. Jesus told His disciples, “*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows*” (Luke 12:6-7). **It's not the amount of wealth that we have that is important to God, but the amount of faith that we have in Him that matters the most.** God has called each one of us to be faithful in our lives, no matter what happens to us, no matter what situations we find ourselves in, and no matter how dark our lives seem to be in at any particular moment. We are maintain our faith in the One who has even given us life, so that He might continue to bless us and provide for us so that we might become a legacy for the future.

But I know how difficult it can be to remain faithful. There are times when it could be easy for us to just give up and die rather than to continue on in faith. But we never know what the Lord has in store for us as we keep our faith and trust in the Him.

Take for example “John Rucyahana, the Anglican bishop of Shyira, Rwanda. John served as a pastor in Uganda during the brutal reign of dictator Idi Amin. Amin targeted 200,000 political opponents, Christian leaders, and members of certain ethnic groups for extermination.

“One day the government soldiers came for John. He remembers, ‘One put the cold barrel of a gun against my ear and held his finger on the trigger. They put me in a vehicle and made me sit on a sack of explosives. As we began moving, I thought, *Even the slightest jolt, and I'm dead.*’

“The soldiers finally released John, figuring they had successfully intimidated him and that he would no longer speak out.

“What the oppressors meant for evil, though, God used for good. Two days after John's harrowing brush with death was Sunday. That day, John walked into the cathedral to find it packed--

people were standing in the aisles. People had heard what happened and had come to find out what he would say. Would he speak out for Christ?

“John did speak for Christ, only this time to a larger group than he could ever have gathered on his own.”²

You see, God can use even the most terrifying experiences we have for His glory. He can use our greatest disappointments to bring about great triumphs. If we remain faithful to Him, God can take what we see as hopeless situations and turn them into the greatest joy beyond what we could ever have conceived.

Ruth was blessed with a loving, caring husband, lifting her up out of poverty into abundance. Naomi was able to rejoice in the life of her grandson when she thought God was afflicting her with misfortune. The people of faith throughout history were able to find God’s presence with them in the most horrible of situations, so that they could leave a lasting testimony of dependence on God. And the poor widow was lifted up as the greatest example of faith by Jesus, giving of all she had in praise and glory to God.

Being so surrounded by such a huge cloud of witnesses, we are also encouraged to remain faithful in our own day. When pandemics plague us, when governments turn against their own people, when faithfulness in Jesus is persecuted, we are not to give up our faith in the Lord our God. It is in these desperate situations that we are called to grow deeper in our faith, knowing that our God will never abandon us, that He will never forsake us, and that He has planned something for us far greater than anything we have here on the earth. It is our faith in Jesus that is most important in our lives, so that whatever comes our way, we can face it with confidence and hope. And then, when those in the future look back upon us, they might also proclaim, “What Faith They Had!”

Stay true in your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and never fail to praise Him for all things. Let’s pray. Father, there are times in our lives when it might be easy for us to give up on You. When the

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 290)

bottom drops out of our lives and we begin to free-fall, surround us with the opportunity to see You at work in our lives so that we might remain faithful to You. Hold us close, never let us go, and give us the guidance we need to continue to seek and find Your Way, even today. Help us to learn from the faithful who have left us their legacy of faith, so that we, too, might follow You as they did. Let us stand strong in our own faith so that others might also be encouraged to live for You in all their ways. This we pray in Jesus' Precious, Powerful, and Holy Name. AMEN.