

## I. VISITING THE CHURCH IN RUSSIA.

### A. My first experience being with the church in Russia.

1. During August 2001, I and six other pastors from Iowa were on a mission's trip to see opportunities to help and encourage the church in Russia. We arrived in Moscow, and from there, proceeded to look at opportunities north of Moscow. Before we left Moscow, we briefly met the Superintendent of the Baptist/Pentecostal Union of Russia who was leading a group of over 1500 churches throughout the former Soviet Union. After meeting the Superintendent, we learned from the missionary that he pastored a church, was arrested and then was imprisoned because of his faith.
2. We ended our trip in St. Petersburg, Russia visiting the Hermitage, the Winter Palace of the Czars, which is now a massive art museum. From the museum, we drove along the Volga River and stopped by a group of people standing at a street corner looking across the river. They were looking towards a prison. Those looking had loved ones who were killed in that prison, many being believers in Christ. We were told that from that prison, blood flowed into the Volga River. There were times boat traffic stopped because of the amount of blood flowing into the river.

### B. My second experience being with the church in Russia.

1. Fourteen months later, I led a team of 18 people, representing six Iowan churches, to help two churches: one in Cherepovets and the other in Klemoskia. Our mission began with worshipping with the Church in Cherepovets. The church was composed of mostly young people. There were between 800 to 900 in the service.
2. It was during this trip I was refreshed to learn that the young people of the church in Russia were grateful for the sacrifice church leaders before them made. Some of those leaders were put into prison like the Superintendent of the Baptist/Pentecostal Union of Russia was. Others died because of their faith. The younger generation, who were experiencing freedom to worship God, were grateful because they realized they would not have a church if it weren't for those before them who paid the price and took a stand for Christ by faith.

## II. Those Before Us – Hebrews 11:32-35a.

### A. I feel Hebrews 11 is a partial list of *those before us* who walked by faith and became instruments in God's plan so we could inherit the blessings we have today. Hebrews 11 says,

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 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. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. **Hebrews 11:32-35a**

### B. Those before us: Heroes of the faith who saw visible answers to God's promises (Hebrews 11:32-35a).

1. The author feels he could list others who walked by faith. However, he makes his point through the examples given. The following people mentioned are:
2. *Gideon* (Judges 6-8).

Israel did evil in the God's eyes. As a result, God gave Israel over to the Midianites for seven years, who oppressed Israel severely. They took their sheep, cattle and donkeys, and ruined their crops. Israel made shelters in caves, mountain clefts and strongholds for their safety. Midian would ravage the land and so impoverished Israel that they cried out to the Lord.

Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress to hide from the Midianites. An angel visits him saying, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." Gideon questions the angel on why God had abandoned them. Gideon lamented because he felt he was the weakest and least. The angel affirmed Gideon as God's chosen deliver. Gideon asked for several signs from God to show that he found favor in God's sight.

Through a process of encouragement and tests, God prepares Gideon to lead Israel. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. Gideon calls for men to fight and thousands answered the call. God said that there were too many men to fight. Those who trembled with fear were asked to leave. 22,000 men left. There were still too many (10,000 men). The group was brought down to the water to drink. 300 lapped water like a dog. These were the ones chosen to fight. Gideon led 300 men and defeated Midian.

God reaffirmed Gideon as He prepared him to deliver Israel. The God who births faith into our hearts is the same God who affirms faith in our journey with Him.

### 3. *Barak* (Judges 4-5).

Israel did evil in God's eyes. The Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin, the king of Canaan, who oppressed Israel for 20 years. Sisera was the commander of his army. The Canaanites had 900 iron chariots.

Israel cried for help. Deborah, who was a prophetess and judge, led Israel. She sent for Barak saying,

"The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead 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 said he would only go lead the battle if Deborah went with him. Deborah went with him, and 10,000 men followed him into battle. Sisera gathered his 900 iron chariots and all his men to fight. Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your hands." At Barak's advance, the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword. Sisera fled the battle on foot and sought refuge from a woman named Jael. Sisera was exhausted and fell into a deep sleep. Jael drove a tent peg into his temple while he was sleeping. Sisera, the enemy, was dead.

Barak was timid, and he wanted Deborah to go with him. But Barak heard God and obeyed Him. He acted in faith and saw the victory.

### 4. *Samson* (Judges 13-16).

Israel did evil in God's eyes and were oppressed by the Philistines for forty years. The Bible says,

A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah, from the clan of the Danites, had a wife who was childless, unable to give birth. The angel of the LORD appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. You will become pregnant and

have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.” **Judges 13:2-5**

It was during this time that Samson was born. He grew and God blessed him. God’s Spirit began to stir him and give him extraordinary strength.

Samson married a Philistine woman and hosted a customary feast for bridegrooms. 30 Philistine men attended. Samson gave a riddle with a challenge to the men. The challenge was Samson would give 30 sets of clothes to them if they could figure out the riddle before the feast ended. If they could not figure it out, the men would give Samson 30 sets of clothes instead. The men could not figure it out. The Philistines asked Samson’s wife to get the answer to the riddle. She cried and nagged Samson for the answer. Samson finally told the answer to his wife, and his wife told it to the Philistines. The Philistines gave the answer before the end the feast.

In anger, Samson begins to take vengeance on the Philistines. He kills 30 men to pay off riddle. Later, he burns the standing grain in their fields with 300 foxes. The Philistines wanted to put Samson to death. As they approach Samson, he kills 1000 Philistines with a donkey’s jaw bone.

Later, Samson falls in love with Delilah. The Philistines wanted to know from Delilah how Samson got his strength. Delilah nagged Samson until he eventually told the truth. He loses his strength when his hair is cut off. The Philistines overtake Samson and gouge out his eyes.

The Philistine rulers assembled to offer a great sacrifice to their god and to celebrate, saying, “Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands” (Judges 16:23). Samson was brought in to their temple to entertain the Philistines.

Samson asked the servant who brought him in to place him by the pillars of the temple. The temple was crowded with men, women and all the rulers of the Philistines. There were three thousand people watching Samson perform from the roof of the temple. Samson prayed for God to strengthen him one more time, so he could have revenge on the Philistines. Samson reached toward the two central pillars on the temple. He braced himself against them and pushed. The temple imploded. The Philistine rulers and all the people were killed in the temple ruins.

Even though Samson had weaknesses, he responded to God in faith. God used him to destroy the enemy.

5. *Jephthah* (Judges 11-12).

Jephthah is remembered for making a hasty vow before battle with the Ammonites. However, he was a man of God and the Spirit of God came on him. Israel defeated the Ammonites.

Jephthah believed God and obeyed Him in faith to bring the victory.

6. *David* (1 and 2 Samuel).

- a) David kills Goliath the Philistine.
- b) He becomes King of Israel.
- c) He conquers and captures Jerusalem, *the City of David*.
- d) Under David, the Ark is brought to Jerusalem.
- e) David walked in faith.

After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’ **Acts 13:22**

David’s faith in God was demonstrated by having a heart for God. True faith responds to the purposes and plans of God’s heart.

7. *Samuel* (1 Samuel).

Samuel gave evidence to a strong faith in God with great strength of character. He faced Saul who was disobedient to God and anointed David while Saul was still king.

Samuel demonstrated a strong faith in God as he obeyed God’s Word. His strength in character confronting a disobedient king and anointing another to be king who would replace King Saul shows his faith in following God in difficult situations.

8. *The prophets*. These and many others are examples of faith.

C. Those before us: Heroes of the faith experiencing difficulties because they walked in faith. Reading further in Hebrews 11, it says,

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed 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, living in caves and in holes in the ground. **Hebrews 11:35b-38**

1. Those who walk in faith can experience negative circumstances. The people mentioned in this passage were tortured, mocked, flogged, chained, imprisoned, stoned, murdered, destitute, afflicted and ill-treated.

Faith trusts in God when it cannot see and persists in belief despite lack of visible answers while going through negative circumstances. All in Hebrews 11 trusted God and persisted despite the obstacles they faced. They all were just as honorable in God’s sight as those who experienced visible answers from God. They walked in faith and were pleasing to God.

Faithful believers under the Old Covenant persisted in faith even though they could not see God’s promise. They walked by faith rather than by sight. Old Testament believers recognized that the world they could see was not the world to which they really belonged. The world is not worthy of these men and women of the faith. They believed God could triumph over death.

2. “So that they might gain an even better resurrection.” (v. 35).

- a) Better resurrection – be raised to the life in the age to come with God.
- b) The “resurrection” was understood and believed before the coming of the Savior, Jesus Christ.
- c) This truth (the resurrection) sustained and energized those who suffered for serving God.

**III. SOMETHING BETTER TOGETHER – Hebrews 11:39-40.**

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

## A. Something Better.

1. All the men and women in Hebrews 11 were commended for their faith.

These were not separated and singled out into different categories and rated on their faith. Each person was not placed on a graded scale in God's sight. So often we can think we can evaluate someone's faith by observing them. We think we can look at the outward appearance, a person's visible situation, to evaluate the person and their faith.

We see only a very small perspective of a faith story in a person's life. We do not see the whole picture. Do we know what God is doing in another person's life? Do we know their longings, desires, concerns, spiritual maturity, challenges or weaknesses? What little we know is incomplete and inadequate to make any judgment.

Faith is an issue of the heart. God looks at the heart. He weighs the heart and knows the person completely body, mind, soul and spirit. God evaluates a person's faith fully and truthfully.

Notice that God does not have a "pecking order" of faith for those men and women in Hebrews 11. Also notice that those who experienced visible answers to God's promises are not looked any differently than those who experienced difficulties, hardships or death.

All give witness to their belief and responded to God. Whether they experienced answers or experienced difficulties, each gave a good report of what it means to walk by faith. These men and women were accredited, attested and approved by God.

2. What was the "promise" our Old Covenant friends were looking for?

The Messiah was going to come. He would redeem and deliver the people from sin.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. **Galatians 4:4-5**

He would justify by grace through redemption.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. **Romans 3:23-25a**

3. "Since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect." **Hebrews 11:40**

*Be made perfect* means to bring to an end, to complete, to finish. Being perfect is to reach an end stage. God has His plan. He is working through an entire process, in stages, to reach the final phase. We believers have our place in God's plan. God is bringing all believers together, both Old Testament and New Testament, at the final stage of His plan. God's plan provides that those who walked by faith throughout the ages will "be made perfect" with believers in Christ Jesus. Old Testament and New Testament believers will be brought into the presence of Christ together.

## B. Someone better

1. Jesus, who is greater than Moses.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses **Hebrews 3:1-3a**

2. Jesus, the Great High Priest.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. **Hebrews 4:14-15**

3. Jesus, the Guarantee of a better Covenant.

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. . . . This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. **Hebrews 7:22; 8:10**

4. Jesus, the Sacrifice once for all.

And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. **Hebrews 10:10**

C. Something Better Together.

The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 did not receive what was promised by God. The promise had an appointed time. These believers were looking ahead to the promise. The promised blessing was coming. They walked in faith with anticipation of God's promise being fulfilled. The promise was given. Christ came to earth, died for the sin of the world, rose from the dead victorious over sin and death and ascended to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God.

Believers in Christ today are working through an entire process to reach the final phase. The believers of old will be united with New Testament believers because we put our faith in the work Christ accomplished through His death, resurrection and ascension. The Bible says:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **1 Peter 3:18**

Believers (Old Testament and New Testament) are not at home in this world. We are strangers and pilgrims. Believers are citizens of heaven. The Bible says:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. **Philippians 3:20**

Believers have a home to look forward to.

The Old Testament believers looked ahead to the Cross; New Testament believers look back to the Cross. The process is coming together; all believers will be united together with their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All these belong to us, and us to them. We are better together. Jesus Christ is the connection between the Old Testament believers before Him and the New Testament believers today.

#### IV. BETTER TOGETHER!

- A. The church is the body of believers in Jesus Christ. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are definitely involved in this living organism called the church. What we have today didn't just happen. God's plan is one where He calls and uses people to be channels of His love, blessing and grace.
- B. People of faith.

People who believe the truth. People who walk with their God. People who believe and desire to follow God are those who enter God's plan for their life. They are not perfect. They often feel inadequate. They often do not feel they have much to contribute. They are just people that have the attitude before God, "Here am I, use me." They are believers who take a next step with Jesus consistently. These are people that qualify under God to be used by Him in His plan.

Ponder the Heroes of the Faith in Hebrews 11. Think of all the things that happened by faith. Think of those things that God did because they walked by faith. What if these men and women didn't walk by faith?

- C. The importance of faith (an example).

Think for a moment on Jesus' lineage in Matthew 1:1-16. Five of the people on that lineage are found in Hebrews 11: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab and David. What if they didn't walk by faith? (Things would look differently today).

Whether believers who walked by faith were visible and known or anonymous and unknown, we owe a debt of gratitude more than we know. Redeemed believers of every age are included in the fellowship of Christ. The Bible says,

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. **1 Peter 2:9-10**

- D. Are we grateful of what God has done? Are we grateful for what others have done before us? Are we grateful enough to follow the example set before us to walk by faith and be used by God?

Almost 22 years ago now, young Russian believers taught me by their example:

1. Be thankful for the freedom to worship Christ.
2. Be thankful for the fellowship of believers.
3. Be thankful for those that have gone before, because what you have now to enjoy didn't just happen. It was gifted to you by the Almighty God and the sacrifice of believers of precious faith.