

Cultivating Optimistic Faith

Hebrews 10:36-12:3

1. Introduction

The theme of this conference is resilience in ministry. In recent qualitative American research the first need identified by a large cohort of pastors was ongoing spiritual formation. It was the need to ensure that they continue to focus as a priority on their own spiritual journey and growth. In the light of my reading in the area of resilience and spirituality I will lead four Bible reflections on the following topics, namely cultivating optimistic faith, accepting divine discipline, coping with discouragement and praying when downcast.

Let me begin with a story of a farmer who owned an old mule which fell into his well. After carefully assessing the impossible situation he called his neighbours to assist in burying the animal to put it out of its misery. Initially the mule was hysterical, but then it had an idea. So every time a shovel load of dirt hit its back, it shook it off and stepped up. Fighting the temptation to 'panic' it just kept shaking the dirt off and stepping up until it emerged triumphantly from the hole onto solid ground. What seemed to be burying the creature actually helped because of the manner in which it handled adversity! Resiliency is about surviving and thriving. It is about

bouncing back from difficult and stressful situations which often generate negative emotions. It is about recovering well-being. While the word is not used in Scripture, the cognate theological themes are endurance, perseverance and faithfulness. All these themes are found in Hebrews 10:36-12:3 which we will now look at in this study.

2. Enduring Needs Faith (Hebrews 10:36-39)

In the space of ten years the congregations in Rome for whom the Book of Hebrews was written had been tempted to give up on following Christ because the cost was too great. In the early 50's of the first century they had courageously experienced abuse,

imprisonment and the loss of their property under the Emperor Claudius, but this was followed by a period of relative peace and stability for the Christian community. Now a decade later the world had gone mad under Nero, their world was falling apart and they faced execution because they belonged to Christ. So this 'brief' sermon (the author's own self-description!) was written to fearful men and women to encourage them to persevere with committed faith and costly discipleship no matter what might happen in the future. Although our situation is far more benign we still need to heed these timeless words -

³⁶*For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷For yet 'in a very little while,*

the one who is coming will come

and will not delay;

³⁸*but my righteous one will live by faith.*

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.'

³⁹*But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.*

Notice endurance is directed to the enjoyment of all that is promised in Christ. The preacher assures his friends that when they have done the will of God (that is, remaining firm in following and living for Christ in a hostile environment) they will receive what he has promised. He supports this by a quote from the Old Testament prophecy of Habakkuk and indicates that the returning Jesus will come to vindicate his people and validate their faith in him. In the

meantime quoting Habakkuk 2:4 he says *but my righteous one will live by faith*. It is important to note the different nuance in the way this key text is used here in contrast to Paul's use of it in Romans where it is crucial to his argument about justification by faith. In that letter *faith* is our subjective backward looking response to the past finished work of Christ (the righteous one) on the cross. But here in this context, *faith* is forward looking and includes the concept of hope. It is therefore focused on the future. In Hebrews the

one who lives by faith is the committed Christian whose trust is in God's word of promise. Effectively the person of faith says –

I will live in the light of the coming of Christ. I will respond to my circumstances knowing God's promises are reliable. I will completely identify with God and with the content of his promise

Christians can live by faith and please the Lord, or they can turn away and displease him (39).

In secular literature on human resilience there are a cluster of personal qualities which appear frequently. A positive outlook is central but hardiness, patience, tolerance, faith, adaptability and hope are all mentioned. Rather than just being inherent traits the research shows these things can be learned. Victor Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. He observed that optimism was one of the keys to resilience in that setting. Those who were more likely to survive internment in concentration camps were those who believed they would eventually be freed, but 'did not put time limits on their hope'.

I want to suggest therefore that in order to be resilient in Christian ministry we need to cultivate an optimistic faith which waits on God to complete his work. We will now focus on some of the examples of this sort of faith listed in Hebrews 11.

3. Illustrating Optimistic Faith (11:1-40)

Hebrews 11 commences with two significant descriptive features of optimistic faith which tie in with two other features of resilience, namely a sense of transcendence and an overriding sense of purpose in life. The preacher begins -

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Notice firstly that *faith* is directed to the future as opposed to the present and to the invisible as opposed to the visible. It is such forward looking faith which enables us to advance courageously

into an unknown future supported only by the word of God. Then secondly two strong words are used of the nature of *faith*, namely *assurance* and *conviction* which implies a definite action based on good evidence, grounded in what God has said and done. In other words optimistic faith is the means by which we can see the things which happen in our lives now from the perspective of God. It enables us to see beyond the boundaries of time and space. It enables us to discern what God has done, what God is doing and what he will do. It is the means by which we can embrace the future because it is guaranteed by the promise of our God who cannot lie. It is this confident faith which takes God and his word seriously which wins his approval (2) and moreover it is stressed that without such faith it is impossible to please him (6).

In the rest of the chapter and into the opening verses of the next our author underscores that faith is essentially determined by hope. He parades a long list of witnesses whose life of faith was a believing response to the promise of God. The initial paragraphs move selectively and rapidly from Genesis 1 to Joshua 6 (verses 4-31). Then the format changes with a list of names of those who through faith experienced triumph or deliverance from death (verses 32-35a), before a very frank acknowledgement of unnamed others who were not delivered from suffering, hardship or death, but nonetheless demonstrated firm, persevering faithfulness (verses 35b-38). There is much to ponder. We cannot examine it all so let us look briefly at just three snapshots to illustrate the point -

• Illustration 1 - Abraham

Abraham is an obvious first example of resilience because of optimistic, forward looking faith which secures hope -

⁸*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.* ⁹*By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.*

¹⁰*For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

While still grieving at family loss and at the age of 75, Abraham left familiar and comfortable surroundings in a civilised city in response to the call of God to go as a nomad to an unknown place. He responded immediately to the command and promises of God. He risked everything to find his reward in what he ultimately did not live to see and what was intangible, namely a friendship with the living God. He demonstrated openness to a future which was guaranteed only by the promises of God.

Abraham's entire pilgrimage was therefore both the response and an expression of optimistic faith which was sustained by a future vision of the city of God.

- **Illustration 2 - Moses**

Moses is the second illustration of resilience because of optimistic faith -

²⁴*By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.*

Because of circumstances beyond his control Moses had the option of a life of privilege and power, but he chose to love God more than the world. His humanly crazy choice went against the voice of

gratitude (Pharaoh's daughter had saved him from death and had invested in his upbringing), the voice of *opportunity* (to climb the ladder to the top), the voice of *self-indulgence* (Egyptian gods made no moral demands) and the voice of *security* (as an Egyptian prince he enjoyed the protection and safety of Pharaoh).

By faith he instead chose abuse to identify with the despised people of God because his focus was not on the transient

present, but on the future eternal reward God had promised his people. In other words he never lost sight of the fact that God was there. His eyes were fixed on God. The word *looked* in verse 26 has this sense, being used of an artist's concentrated gaze on the object or model being reproduced in paint or clay. His was a determined choice to prefer the praise of God. Significantly the writer adds *he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible*

The life choices of Moses and his ultimate resilience were an expression of optimistic faith in the promises and purposes of God.

- **Illustration 3 – Unnamed saints**

The roll call of faithful witnesses ends with a list of unnamed saints who either accomplished great things for God or endured great things for God. Given our current church culture lauds the former, I want to focus on the latter because we sometimes forget it is even more of a triumph of faith to continue to trust in God in the face of pain, hurt, suffering and persecution. In these circumstances optimistic faith is absolutely necessary -

Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

This sobering list reminds us that God does not always deliver his people from utter humiliation and violent death in the here and now. Yet what sustained these saints was an optimistic faith that in the end God would fulfil his promised purpose. They acted in the present in the light of the certainty of God's promised future. The

tell-tale words in this section is their desire *to obtain a better resurrection*. At the time alluded to in this verse belief in a general resurrection had become more

widespread though of course it needed the coming of Jesus to elaborate it, exemplify it and guarantee it.

4. Conclusion

This magnificent chapter on optimistic faith ends with a call for all of us to run our race with *perseverance*, shedding the things which impede progress and instead fixing our eyes on *Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith* who was sustained in his harsh journey by the future prospect of bringing many sons and daughters to glory (12:1-3). We are to all make following and imitating him our first priority. One thing which is essential in becoming more resilient as Christian ministers is cultivating an optimistic faith. To that end

abiding in Christ is absolutely essential (John 15:4). As a first priority we all need to apply ourselves to nourishing this primary relationship or deepening our first love. We need to have a daily time with God to strengthen the lived reality of his transcendence. We need to strengthen our trust in God deliberately by bringing to mind his promises and how completely he has fulfilled them. We need to cooperate with the Spirit in the transformation of our minds by God's word to grow our resilience muscles.

May God in his mercy give us all an optimistic faith.

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