

## Faith and Grace

*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.*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

*Hebrews 11:39-12:3*

On June 17, 2015, a 21-year old white man walked into a church during a prayer service and murdered nine people. Among those killed was the senior pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney. Clem, as he was better known, was preaching at the age of 13, pastor by 18. At the age of 23, he was elected as a state legislator to the South Carolina House of Representatives. He married his wife Jennifer in 1999, and had two daughters, Eliana and Malana. President Barack Obama began his eulogy for Clem this way:

Giving all praise and honor to God.

The Bible calls us to hope. To persevere, and have faith in things not seen.

‘They were still living by faith when they did,’ Scripture tells us. ‘They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on Earth.’

We are here today to remember a man of God who lived by faith. A man who believed in things not seen. A man who believed there were better days ahead, off in the distance. A man of service who persevered, knowing full well he would not receive all those things he was promised, because he believed his efforts would deliver a better life for those who followed.<sup>1</sup>

The President went on to tell of the things that Clem had done in his life, and the mark he had left by his faith on his congregation, his family, and his country. Clem was a modern-day man of faith, one who followed in faith to where God called him. He was not perfect, but he followed in faith. We don’t know all of the details of Reverend Pinckney’s life. But the people who did know him knew of his faith. And they tell of it still today.

Remember how we defined faith? We said that faith encompasses “a firm conviction, producing a full acknowledgement of God’s revelation or truth, a personal surrender to Him, and a conduct inspired by such surrender.”<sup>2</sup> Faith isn’t just belief or just giving our lives to Christ, or even just how we are living. It’s a combination of all three. This is the faith that our heroes in Hebrews 11 showed us, and that those living by faith still show today.

We’ve seen throughout this study that God uses ordinary, messed up, broken people to fulfill His purposes. He used a prostitute, a murderer, a doubter, an adulterer, a stealer, and a cheater to show us examples of faith. How much more does He use us, His imperfect vessels, for His purposes through faith.

*Which of the heroes in Hebrews 11 did you find most unlikely?*

*Which of the heroes in Hebrews 11 did you most relate to? Why?*

Hebrews 11 tells us that all of these people were commended for their faith, and yet none of them received what they had been promised. Abraham never got to see his descendants number the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the beach. Isaac never got to see the future that God had for his two sons, Jacob and Esau. Moses never got to set foot in the Promised Land. The heroes of faith all received promises from God, but never saw them brought to complete fulfillment. And here’s the amazing reason why: God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

When Christ paid the ultimate price on the cross, he bridged the gap between those who had come before, and us. As children of God, we have inherited the promise of salvation, and the all of the promises of the Fathers who came before us. We have been given the gift of eternal life, of the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be streets of gold and we will be eternally in the presence of our Lord. How much greater are all of His promises, now that Christ has paid the price for our sins!

*Read Hebrews 12:1-3.*

Remember all of those people that we studied in the last thirteen chapters? That cloud of witnesses, those heroes of faith, surround us, speaking of the hope, grace, mercy, and faith of those who have come before us. They have endured persecution and opposition – some greater than we could ever imagine – but yet they did not give up or throw in the towel – or, more importantly, discard their faith – in the midst of it all.

And yet there is one who is greater than we can look to. One who has borne our sin, our shame, our guilt, who became flesh and dwelt among us, who empathizes with our weakness. And it is Him who we can look to when we feel like giving up.

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. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Faith and grace intersect at the cross. Grace, the free, unmerited favor of God, and faith, our belief, surrender, and action, intersect where the blood of Christ paid for our sins. Without the cross, there is no reason for our faith. Without His grace given to us, there is no reason for our faith.

When you face trials in your life – when things don’t go as you may have hoped, or when your dreams don’t line up with God’s will for your life right now – look to these heroes of the faith, and ultimately to Christ, that we have studied.

There will be times when you doubt, when you want to throw in the towel – but remember that the God in whom you place your faith is bigger than your fears, your doubts, and your insecurities. No matter how ordinary you feel, God will do extraordinary things through your faith. No matter what you have done, remember that God is using you for His purposes. When your faith is shaking, look to these heroes to remember what God has done through them, and ask Him to show you what He is doing through you.

Don’t lose heart, friends, for the One in whom we place our faith is the God of the Universe, the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. And He paid the price for our sins on the cross, the ultimate sacrifice so that we could have salvation freely through the Son. And He is coming back again, to judge the living and the dead. Seated at the right hand of

God the Father, the Son will welcome us through those heavenly gates, with the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.

<sup>1</sup> B. Obama, Clementa Pinckney Funeral Eulogy.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary.