

LIVING BY FAITH IN OUR GREAT GOD
HEBREWS 11:30-31

In his book *Is a Blue Whale the Biggest Thing There Is?* Robert Wells exposes the size of the universe in understandable terms:

The largest animal on earth is the blue whale...

But a blue whale isn't anywhere near as big as a mountain. If you put one hundred blue whales in a huge jar, you could put millions of whale jars inside a hollowed-out Mount Everest.

But Mount Everest isn't anywhere near as big as the earth. If you stacked one hundred Mount Everests on top of one another, it would be just a whisker on the face of the earth.

And the earth isn't anywhere near as big as the sun. You could fit one million earths inside of the sun.

But the sun, which is a medium-size star, isn't anywhere near as big as a red supergiant star called Antares. Fifty million of our suns could fit inside of Antares.

But Antares isn't anywhere near as big as the Milky Way galaxy. Billions of stars, including super-giants like Antares, as well as countless comets and asteroids, make up the Milky Way galaxy.

But the Milky Way galaxy isn't anywhere near as big as the universe. There are billions of other galaxies in the universe.

And yet, filled with billions of galaxies, the universe is almost totally empty. The distances from one galaxy to another are beyond our imagination.

And God made this simply by speaking it into existence; the psalmist says, "When I consider Your heavens, *the work of Your fingers...*" (Ps. 8:3a) — God's creative work took no more energy than someone "fiddling" with his fingers. That begins to give us an appreciation of the magnitude of God's greatness.

One of our problems is that while we believe in God, we have a tendency to "create Him in our image," that is, we tend to think of Him in human terms — "He is bigger, stronger, and wiser than us," but like us, He has limitations. We have a "little God," who, while great, is not *infinitely* great.

When thinking such (blasphemous and heretical) thoughts, we need to be reminded of some of the extravagant stories of the Bible. And in two very brief verses in Hebrews 11, we find two related stories of the greatness, magnitude, and infinitude of God. These are stories to correct our "little God" thinking.

And they are stories that were designed to correct the "little God" thinking of the original Hebrew readers of this letter. They were tempted to give up their faith in Christ and return to Judaism to escape persecution. Behind their temptation was a belief in the inability of God to take them through suffering.

This reminder from Israel's history is an encouragement of the great ability of God to care for His people in every situation, and in every time. From the story of Joshua and Jericho (Heb. 11:30-31) we learn —

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY BECAUSE HE IS GREAT.

In two stories about Jericho the writer offers two demonstrations of God's unchanging greatness. These circumstances are the kinds of situations in which we are prone to despair and even give up, believing that nothing can overwhelm and resolve our situation.

1. God's Greatness Provides **PROTECTION** in the "**HARDEST**" Circumstances (v. 30)
2. God's Greatness Provides **SALVATION** for the "**WORST**" Sinners (v. 31)

1. God's Greatness Provides PROTECTION in the "HARDEST" Circumstances (v. 30)

- The writer of Hebrews writes very briefly about the difficulties immediately faced by the Israelites after they crossed the Jordan River.
 - ✓ This is not the first time the Israelites came to the Jordan to cross; the first time they came and they offered a pessimistic report after spying out the land (Num. 13:28-33) — they only saw obstacles.
 - ✓ Jericho is the first of the cities that they would have found after cross the Jordan.
 - ✓ The city was not overly large (the Israelites were able to march around it seven times in one day; some have estimated it could have been encircled in about 30 minutes).
 - ✓ But it was well fortified as exemplified by the towers that have been excavated.
 - It was described by Joshua as having a king and "valiant warriors" (Josh. 6:2).
 - The wall was thick enough to have dwellings along the top of it (2:15).
 - The inhabitants certainly contained some of the "giants" feared 40 years earlier (Num. 13).
 - ✓ It is notable that there is no indication this time that the Israelites feared, though Joshua mentions several times the fear of Jericho (2:9, 11, 24; 6:1). Israel's lack of fear is an indication of her faith.
- The story in Joshua is given to emphasize the greatness of God and His care of His people:
 - ✓ God's provision was His promise to Moses and Joshua (Dt. 31:3-6; Josh. 1:5-9, 11)
 - ✓ The report of God's provision was known in Jericho (2:10-11); they were not concerned about the number of the people invading the land, but about the power of God in the people.
 - ✓ The nation gathered stones from the Jordan as a memorial to God's provision (4: 21-24)
 - ✓ The appearance of the *captain of the Lord's host* (5:13-15) affirmed God's promise to provide.
 - ✓ The whole plan of Jericho's destruction demonstrated that this was the Lord's work (6:2, 16, 27)
 - The *men of war* were to circle the city once each day for six days (6:3).
 - The warriors were to be led by seven priests, each carrying trumpets made from ram's horns, followed by the Ark of the Covenant (God's presence; 6:4).
 - The Ark was followed by another contingent of soldiers (6:13) and a group of "people" (6:7).
 - For six days, there was no sound of anything except the blowing of the horns and the marching people (6:10).
 - One the seventh day, they marched around the city six times (3+ hours??) and then on the seventh time the soldiers and people all shouted and the *walls fell* (6:16, 20; Heb. 11:30).
 - *This is an unconventional plan of attack.* Just as there was nothing inherent in the blood of the animals that could have prevented the angel of the Lord from entering the houses (Heb. 11:28), there was nothing inherent in their marching that would produce the destruction of the walls.

- In all these things, the nation did not once protest, complain, or disobey. They completely fulfilled God’s commands about how to defeat Jericho (6:20-21, 24) — there is no suggestion that they did anything against the Lord’s commands in defeating the city — for an entire week (though afterwards there was a problem with obedience, cf. Achan, 7:1ff).
 - ✓ While they greatly outnumbered the people of Jericho, these same circumstances had previously led the people to be fearful, grumble, and ultimately rebel against God.
 - ✓ The outward circumstances had not changed significantly (different people, but the same number of people; Moses was gone, but replaced by Joshua).
 - ✓ Their circumstances had not changed, but *they* had changed — particularly, they now had confidence in God that led them to obey Him (which is one of the messages of Joshua — a book of the victory of God).
- Some implications from the story of Jericho:
 - ✓ **Trying circumstances are beneficial** because they reveal our source of confidence, joy, and refuge. When we become fearful, it evidences what we value and what we trust (do we find our confidence in ourselves or what we can see, or in the One whom we cannot see, 11:1?).
 - ✓ **Trying circumstances do not mean we have to be fearful.** Israel faced the same trouble two times: once she was fearful and once she was faithful. The writer is reminding us through these stories that it is always possible to be faithful (and not fearful). Our circumstances may be hard (and they may change and become harder), but God is always unchangingly faithful and great. Cf. 13:5-6.
 - ✓ **Trying circumstances may not end “well” on earth;** they will all end well in Heaven (10:36; 11:1, 6). Hard circumstances are hard, but they are not definitive and final; they are for our transformation (sanctification), and ultimately for our glorification. Whether we live or die, God is great and He can be trusted (Phil. 1:20-21).

2. God’s Greatness Provides SALVATION for the “WORST” Sinners (v. 31)

- Hebrews 11 is a story about flawed people and a great God. It is a story about weak people whom God uses in extraordinary ways. It is not about great people; it is about a great God who uses weak people.
- But even as we recognize weaknesses in Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, we also recognize that they are men that God used in particularly great ways. We can look to them as “heroes,” men whose faith is worth imitating (1 Cor. 11:1).
- Then, at the end of the list of named people, the writer seems to take a sharp left turn, inserting the faith of **Rahab**. And just to make sure we remember who she is, he identifies her by profession: **harlot**.
Who Rahab was: She is an unexpected participant in this list because:
 - ✓ *She is a woman.* And as in the days of Jesus, women were not respected or valued. Creation gave equal status to men and women as image-bearers of God (Gen. 1:27), and “The ancient Hebrews

never entirely lost the light of their original revelation, and, more than any other oriental race, held woman in high esteem, honor and affection.” [ISBE] But the intrusion of sin left women in typically precarious positions in the world, and Israel was regularly influenced by culture; as one dictionary says, “The ancient world was a man’s world...” [NIDB] So by her gender, Rahab was an “outsider.”

- ✓ *She has sinned in particularly offensive ways:* she was a prostitute. She is the first person in this narrative with an “unsavory” reputation. She is “not the kind of person” to include in lists like this.
 - Some have attempted to soften what the word **harlot** means; the historian Josephus said she was an “innkeeper” and another said she was a “seller of food.” The word means that she engaged in sexual sin. There’s no easy way to say it.
 - It is also indicative of the kind of people that God loves to save; Jesus didn’t move away from sinners like Rahab, He drew them to Him so He could change them (Mt. 21:31-32; Lk. 15:30).
- ✓ *She is a Gentile.* She is not the first “Gentile” in this list — when Abram was called, he was living in Ur (Chaldea) as a pagan (Josh. 24:2). But she is not just a Gentile; she is a Canaanite (pagan worshipper) and an Amorite, a race of people under God’s judgment (**Gen. 15:16**).
- ✓ In every conceivable way, *she is an outsider.* There is no reason to anticipate her inclusion in this list.
- ✓ In every conceivable way, she is an outsider. *And she **had faith** in God and God saved her.*

• What Rahab did (Josh. 2)

- ✓ The writer of the Hebrews notes that she **welcomed the spies in peace** —
 - She protected them when they were suspected (2:3-7).
 - She acted in faith and believed God (2:8-14, which is the heart of the story).
 - She did everything they told her to do until and during Israel’s attack (2:15ff).
- ✓ As a result of her actions, the writer of Hebrews says she **did not perish along with...disobedient**.
 - Notice that the contrast is between Rahab’s *faith* and the other’s *disobedience*. So we can say that to exercise faith is to be obedient (and when we obey we are trusting God). And to be rebellious is to not trust God; lack of faith will produce rebellious disobedience (which is why any act of disobedience in a child is so important to correct).
 - The inference also is that she had the same revelation as the rest of the inhabitants of Jericho, but only she demonstrated faith. They knew and should have (and could have) repented.
 - As a result of her faith that produced obedience to God, she was given life (**Josh. 6:22-25**). Notice that she didn’t save herself, but she was granted life, which leads to final part of story...

• What God did (Josh. 6:22-25)

- ✓ *God spared her life physically* (6:22-25).
- ✓ *God spared her life spiritually* (6:25b; **Js. 2:25**).
- ✓ Oh, and one more thing that God did for Rahab — *He included her in the Messianic line* (**Mt. 1:5**).

- She welcomed the spies, acted in faith during the siege, and was in turn welcomed by the Israelites, married Salmon, became the mother of Boaz, and the great grandfather of David.
- We would say that was preposterous. Perhaps. Just as preposterous as His saving us. All of us had sin that precluded us from being saved; all were enemies, hating God. All were worthy of His wrath, ready for His examination and judgment (Heb. 4:12). And like Rahab, He saved us.
- ✓ If you are a believer, give thanks and rejoice in God’s extravagant provision for you and Rahab. Rahab “is a blessed example both of the sovereignty of God’s grace and of its power; of its freedom and sovereignty, in the calling and conversion of a person given up through her own choice to the vilest of sins. Nobody, no sin, should lead to despair when the cure of God’s sovereign, almighty grace is engaged (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).” [John Owen]
- ✓ If you are not a believer, you are just like Rahab deserving judgment; and you are just like Rahab and can by faith believe in God’s salvation and be saved.
 - Did you notice the irony of this story? The *prostitute* is not considered “disobedient,” but the non-prostitutes are disobedient? The difference is not what they did, but what they believed.
 - No matter what sin you have committed, no matter how long you have sinned in rebellion against God, if you trust Christ as your Savior from that sin, He will cleanse you from it, and He will liberate you from it so that you can enjoy Him.
 - We don’t get life because we are great; we are made alive by the greatness of God and Christ’s death.

CONCLUSION:

In 1715, **King Louis XIV** of France died — it was Louis who called himself, “Louis, the Great.” In his exalted view of himself he said, “I am the State.” It has been noted that his court was the most magnificent in Europe and his funeral was spectacular. His body was placed in a gold coffin and at his funeral its beauty was magnified by all the lights being dimmed in the cathedral with only one special candle above his coffin to light it. It was a moving and powerful setting.



Then Bishop Jean Baptiste Massillon rose to speak. He reached down to the coffin and snuffed out the candle and then poignantly uttered these words: **“Only God is great.”**

Yes. We are not great. We are incapable and inadequate and frequently overwhelmed. And our weakness is granted to us, in part, to see the greatness and sufficiency of God. *He is great.*

In every circumstance and for every sin, He is great and adequate. Whatever the persecution of the Hebrews and whatever our troubles, God is trustworthy. Israel had faith *at* Jericho. Rahab had faith *in* Jericho. It was wise to have faith in Him then. It is wise and good to have faith in Him now.

BENEDICTION: **Hebrews 13:20-21**