

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 NIV “Is the Lord making you perfect?”

“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. ³² 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, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better

resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ 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—

³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. ³⁹ **These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,** ⁴⁰ **since 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.”**

This long text confuses some people.

Even Bible experts get lost in it.

The paragraphing and headings in most Bible translations prove my point.

You likely experience the conflicts this Hebrews text describes, yet few recognize a differentiation the Hebrews writer made.

Religious leaders convey mixed signals about the godly life.

Here’s an example of what I mean:

Some ministers and Sunday school teachers assure you that God’s people always win.

Recall how David slew Goliath and Daniel survived the lion’s den?

Emphasis on these stories intimates that godly people soon triumph in every instance.

Godly folks win financially and personally.

Popular evangelists showcase guests who gain stardom in sports, entertainment, and business.

A female host of a news program, who professes to follow Christ, showed photos of three women who attend her Bible study.

All were attractive, immaculately dressed and manicured women in their 30s.

Do they allow less-appealing women to join their group?

I do not know their hearts;

I can’t speak to their sincerity.

God accurately judges people; no human can.

In a related topic, today’s text shows why I question the editing in many Bible versions.

Read Hebrews chapter 11 noting verses four through 35a, and you’ll see that the author mentions successful godly people.

He recapped their wins in v.33: **“who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised.”**

These godly folks conquered, established justice, and made personal gains during their lifetimes.

The first sentence in v. 35 is the final example of the godly folks win theme:

“Women received back their dead, raised to life again.”

One instance is a widow, whose boy died; the prophet Elijah raised him back to life.¹

This woman won; she got her son back and he evidently lived a normal life-span.

The boy experienced a temporary resurrection, yet he didn’t live forever.

From verse 4 to mid-verse 35, chapter 11 repeatedly tells of folks who won in life.

The author maintains the theme: they **“gained what was promised.”**

- They escaped slavery.
- Crossed the Red Sea on dry land.
- Etc.

A sentence with a new theme, however, begins in the middle of Hebrews 11: 35:

“There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.”

I consulted ten different versions (translations) in my office and reviewed six others online.

Only one of the 16 starts a new paragraph in the middle of verse 35. Only the *Today’s English Version* emphasizes the difference in experiences.

In the TEV, the new paragraph reads: “Others, refusing to accept freedom, died under torture in order to be raised to a better life.”

In the previous section, 4-35a: gaining “what was promised” sometimes meant winning military victories or receiving lands and houses in this life.

Gaining **“what was promised”** sometimes included being raised from the dead as happened to the widow’s son.

That raising was temporary, of course, because the fellow died again later.

The e.g. s in Hebrews 11 through v. 35a, are of folks who **“gained what was promised;”** **They enjoyed victories in war, personal gain, and maybe a few extra decades of life.**

¹ 1 Kings 17:7-24

But beginning in 11: 35b and after: “none of them received what had been promised.”

They got no reward in this life.

Enemies persecuted these folks for their godliness and faithfulness to God.

These people endured jeering, chaining, flogging, and death—no permanence.

In this life, they received no benefits for honoring God: “none of them received what had been promised.”

Jeremiah was one of those threatened, imprisoned, persecuted folks who never got what was promised.²

Isaiah probably was, too.

God commended their faith, but they received no tangible rewards: no victories, no recognition, or thanks: **“None of them received what had been promised.”**

From mid-verse 35 on, we see examples of godly folks, who did not receive “what had been promised.”

² Jeremiah bought land he never got to enjoy. In Jeremiah 32, the Lord ordered him to purchase land from his cousin. At the time, the Babylonian army was already besieging Jerusalem.

This section accentuates a significant change. **These folks suffered horribly for their faith.**

Of them the Hebrews writer said: **“God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”**

Hebrews informs us that those who trusted God and received no reward prior to Jesus would join Jesus’ people in receiving one and being made perfect with them.

Do you agree that a new paragraph should start in the middle of verse 35?

Three big questions remain for us:

- 1. What is this reward?**
- 2. What does perfection mean?**
- 3. How do we obtain perfection?**

Recall the first verse of where I think the new paragraph should start?

“There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.”

Those people didn't cry “uncle” or quit when facing, jeering, persecution, or death.

As Hebrews was being written, many Christians underwent scorn and mockery. The world still reviles, rejects, and hates those who believe in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, openly witness to his resurrection, and follow Jesus' loving example.

Some preachers hardly ever speak of the resurrection.

Believers endure ridicule and persevere, looking to an eternal resurrection when Jesus returns to Judge all people.

The writer of Hebrews states that not all godly people receive their rewards now.

- “Goliath” sometimes beats them.
- The walls of Jericho don't always fall.
- Not everyone walks through the Red Sea as if on dry land.
- God doesn't always perform miracles.

Not all Christians get to stand to applause in the winners' circle with beautiful folks.

God fulfills his promise to them and us in the afterlife; he promises immortality in the resurrection.

Peter, who was one of the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, affirmed:

“In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”³

Everything you and I presently own and treasure will rot, die, decay, rust, fade, or depreciate.

How sure is God's promise-reward?

Did the sun come up this morning?

God who created the sun and controls the Cosmos promised resurrection.

Do not doubt him.

2. What does perfection mean?



³ 1 Peter 1:3, 4 NIV

When I first began attending Pepperdine, I heard rumors of a few ministers striving seriously for perfection.

It’s as if they defined a Christian life by listing certain character qualities and were checking off the boxes as they progressed.

After all, didn’t Jesus say: “Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect”?

Probably many non-Christians would scoff at the idea as did the poet Alexander Pope:

“Then say not Man’s imperfect, Heav’n in fault; Say rather, Man’s as perfect as he ought.”⁴

I think Pope meant: people are as good as they can get and need to be.

Pope didn’t sound very hopeful, did he?

Those ministers 1950s ministers striving for perfection seemed to misunderstand; biblical perfection does not mean flawless.

The word translated *perfect*⁵ means complete or whole as in maturity.

The word is translated as *mature* in Hebrews 5:14:

“But solid food is for the *mature*, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

In the first century, some were evidently so immature and incomplete in Christ they needed spiritual “bottle-feeding.”

They weren’t ready for an adult diet.

Are you maturing in your walk with God?
Are you working to be a complete believer?

To understand *completeness*, think of newly-planted corn that bursts above the surface with tender green leaves.

At many stages, the plants appear healthy.

Not until those stalks develop ears, silk, fully mature with healthy rows of kernels and also properly dry is the farmer happy.

In the meantime those cornstalks must resist drought, insects, mildew, flooding damaging winds and other threats.

⁴ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, 1 1688-1744

⁵ τέλος

We think we are good Christians because we attend services most of time and contribute significant amounts.

But too few look at our need to keep maturing in Christ so that we'll be complete in him.

We must also be alert to another factor.

We need to know what direction we are going.

Let me share a story I read long ago:

On the platform of a railroad station sat a large crate with a dog inside. He was the saddest dog you can imagine. A lady asked about him.

“You would be sad, too,” she was told “if you were in his plight. He’s chewed the tag off his crate, and he doesn’t know where he is going.”

Many of us get depressed because we forget where we are going.

We get down because we hear that Christians face opposition in Congress and the courts.



Hebrews encourages discouraged people.

“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.”

12: 3 “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Jesus perfected faith because he remained faithful to God scorning the shame of the cross enduring its pain and indignity.

William H. Willimon said that when he was in college, the late Carlyle Marney, came to his college for a religious emphasis week. One of the students asked, “Dr. Marney, let us hear you say a word or two, about the resurrection of the dead.”

“I will not discuss that with people like you,” replied Marney.

“Why not?” we asked.

“I don’t discuss such matters with anyone under thirty,” said Marney.

“Why,” we persisted.

“Look at you,” said Marney, “prime of life, potent, never have you known honest to God failure, heartburn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what in God’s name can you know of a dark world which makes sense only if Christ is raised?”⁶

This world makes sense only if Christ was raised. His promise is real if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith

The abundant, overwhelming evidence that Jesus returned from the dead powerfully convinced early Christians.

They dedicated themselves to sharing the great news assured that God always keeps his promises.

Jesus’ resurrection means: death is dead. The New Testament equally convinces us. We shall never be complete until we gladly share this greatest news ever: Jesus defeated death forever.

Satan humiliated Christ momentarily at the cross...
but Christ humiliated Satan eternally in His resurrection.

Borrowed.

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⁶ *On A Wild and Windy Mountain,* William H. Willimon Abingdon)