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The Flawed and the Faithful: part 1

“Flawed, but not Faithful”, by Pastor Ryan Emmons

Hebrews 11:1-2, 39-40; 12:1

Intro:

Everyone loves a hero. People will often comment about a certain person being their hero, or a hero in their life. Sometimes those heroes are people who are close to us in some way – a relative, a co-worker, a teacher, or so on. Sometimes the hero is someone who we know, but aren’t particularly close to, like maybe a local athlete or an emergency responder we are acquainted with. And sometimes those heroes are people far removed from us, but who have received celebrity status in some way that elicits our placing them as a hero in our lives.

Comic books have been playing off the theme of heroes and villains since the beginning. One of the most popular, or perhaps most familiar comic book hero is Batman. Batman has been speeding around in fighting crime in his batmobile for decades. He is a character that seems to be walking the path of goodness without any problems. Sure, he may have a pretty tragic backstory, but that just makes it more impressive that he can be so good. Perhaps the height of Batman goodness was found in the 1960’s television show starring Adam West as Batman. This Batman not only stopped the bad guys, but he did so without breaking any other laws, and providing a positive moral example for his young ward Robin – along with everyone else who watched the show.

But sometimes those heroes don’t live up to the title. Sometimes they are a little flawed. One of the tenets of the hero in comic books is that they never ever kill the villain. Beat up – sure. Tie up so they can be put into a prison of some fashion – you bet. But kill... never. That is outside the line of being a hero. And sometimes the hero crosses over that line and the darker side of their character comes through.

Perhaps you are familiar with the Marvel hero Thor. If you have seen any of the more recent Avengers movies, you will know that Thor is an open book character. The very fact that he can wield the mighty hammer Mjolnir points to his strong and good character. However, and at the risk of spoiling a bit of the movie for you, in “Avengers: End Game”, Thor – enraged and emotionally overcome by the atrocities committed by Thanos, crosses the line of hero and without even giving Thanos a chance to show remorse for his actions, promptly cuts Thanos’ head off.

What are we supposed to do when the hero is flawed?

Perhaps we can bring this a little closer to home and ask the question: What are we supposed to do when the faithful are flawed? How can we reconcile being a person of faith, and yet also flawed?

This morning I am starting a new sermon series taking a look at those people of faith that the writer of Hebrews talks about in Hebrews chapter 11. We won’t be looking at all of the people listed, but we will look at a few. These are all people who the writer of Hebrews says are to be held up because of their faith. They are noteworthy because of it. They changed the course of humanity, stood up for God, and set an example of what it means to be a person of faith. They were also flawed individuals. Their flaws, however, did not disqualify them from God’s grace, being invited to participate in His kingdom plan, and a spot on the great wall of faith that is Hebrews chapter 11.

We do have to be careful, however, that we don’t assume that being flawed is ok and that the list in Hebrews really just shows that we can live questionable lives and still receive praise from God if we claim faith in Him.

All of the people on this list, and as I said we will look at a few of them more closely over the next few weeks, model for us what it looks like to live faithfully in spite of our flaws, not how to use faith to justify our flaws.

And we will begin by looking at an example of it looks like to be flawed, but not faithful.

Rehoboam:

I'd like you to meet Rehoboam. Never heard of him, you say? Fair enough. Rehoboam's story takes place in the Old Testament. You can find his whole story, or at least the parts of it that were considered significant to the purposes of being included in Scripture, in 1 Kings 12:1-24; 14: 21-30 and more expansively in 2 Chronicles chapters 10-12. I would encourage you to take some time this week to look up those chapters and read about him for yourself.

He was one of the sons of King Solomon. He wasn't the oldest, possibly not even the most liked, but for some reason when Solomon died it was Rehoboam who was in line to inherit the throne of David and to become the leader of all Israel. There's only one small problem... the kingdom of Israel was not so solid as it was during the height of his father's reign. There were some fractures and some discontent with how the King was running the show.

Rehoboam stepped into this growing unhappiness, hoping to keep the people united under his reign. He starts out on a reasonably good note. At the beginning of 2 Chronicles 10, we find him travelling to Shechem to so that the people of Israel can appoint him as king. Shechem is a special place. It is the place where Jacob and Abraham had placed stones and built altars to God. It is also the place where Joshua placed a stone reminder of the God's faithfulness in leading the Israelites into the land that God had promised them. For Rehoboam, it is hoped that being reminded of such things, and the providence of God in them, would turn the people's minds to confirming him as king because he is the descendant of David. This is a mostly good part of Rehoboam's story. He is aware of, and honors, the strong history of God's presence and leading for the Israelites. Even if it borders on selfish motives.

However, Rehoboam's plans are derailed quickly by a delegation from the northern tribes of Israel (basically all the ones that were not Judah and Benjamin)

led by Jeroboam, who had been high up in Solomon's court but had been exiled by Solomon. Now he had returned and the purpose of the questioning was to see what kind of a king this Rehoboam would be. The fate of the kingdom is now resting on a knife-edge...

"What will you do about the heavy taxes and forced labour that Solomon had burdened the people with?" Came the primary question (you can find all of this in 2 Chronicles 10). "If you lighten the load, then we will be your loyal subjects."

Seems a reasonable request, but not wanting to do anything hasty, Rehoboam asks for three days to ponder the question and consult his advisors. This is a reasonable request and it is granted. Perhaps, we will see that Rehoboam is not really so bad. I mean, there is nothing yet to indicate that he is flawed.

First, he consults with the elder advisors, many of whom were advisors to his father, King Solomon. Their advice is to give the people what they want, and by doing so Rehoboam will have the whole of Israel united as his loyal subjects.

But, Rehoboam doesn't like that advice. Or at the very least, he is not convinced that it is the best advice for him to take. So he seeks out a second opinion. Where does he go? Well, where do you go when you want a second opinion about something, especially when the first opinion is not 100% to your liking? He went to his friends and peers. These are younger nobles. Probably the sons of those who served in Solomon's court. They are the spoiled rich kids who think that they are entitled to every advantage because their parents had actually worked hard (not them). This group of advisors give the exact opposite advice. They tell Rehoboam to increase the burdens on the people. And, he should tell them his answer in as condescending a manner as possible.

He takes the advice of the second group of men, and the result is that Jeroboam leaves and takes with him all the northern tribes. And now the nation is divided and will be until the end of the line of kings, for both groups. This was a bad

move. This shows the flaws of Rehoboam's character. But his story is not yet done.

He goes home and promptly sets to work gathering the army so that he can go north and put those impudent traitors in their proper place. He has a big army. And he is about to set off and fight against, well, his extended family as it were. But, the prophet Shemaiah brings him a message from God saying don't go to war against the northern tribes. God is at work, somehow.

One might think that Rehoboam would not be disposed to listen to a random prophet, but he does. This is sign of faithfulness, perhaps. It is at the very least a good move made by him and so maybe not all is lost for our "hero". This is how chapter 11 starts off. Verse 17 gives us yet even more hope. In this chapter we find that the northern priests and Levites don't agree with splitting the nation and they all head south to live in and near Jerusalem and to support the king in David's line. The result of this good favor towards the king, is that Rehoboam not only gets some good work done on fortifying Jerusalem and Judah, but the people under his leadership spend the next three years faithfully following in the footsteps of David and Solomon with regard to their devotion and attention to Yahweh.

This is a good moment in Rehoboam's life and rule, and we might be tempted to think that he has now turned the corner that he needs to. Nope.

Right away as chapter 12 starts off we find that the pattern that will soon become familiar with the kings of both Israel and Judah, begins at Rehoboam. He has become strong and well established as king, and as a result has abandoned the laws of God.

This is all too familiar in human life. When things go well for us, we assume that we don't need God, not that we should be thankful to God for giving us that blessing. So Rehoboam becomes unfaithful to God, and takes the Israelites in

Judah with him. God punishes the people for their unfaithfulness by bringing the king of Egypt, Shishak, to attack and plunder Jerusalem. Which they do.

In chapter 12 verse 6, our confused hero turns about once again and humbles himself before God, and he relents his punishment. This a good thing. Or at least it appears as such. Perhaps it was not as genuine as we might believe through the brief description that we have, because God still allows for them to become vassals of Egypt; they just aren't completely destroyed by Egypt. There were still some good things in the land of Judah, according to the Chronicler.

The Final Word:

However, the final word on Rehoboam is what seals the lid on his coffin. In 12:14 we find the succinct and conclusive summary of his reign as "he was an evil king, for he did not seek the Lord with all his heart."

Flawed. But not faithful.

I bring up Rehoboam's story because he acts as a contrast to the people we will discover in Hebrews chapter 11. It would seem that he has moments of faithfulness that should cover over any flaws that he may have as a believer. But the final verdict is that it didn't. Something about what was behind his good actions, led God – through the pen of the Chronicler – to pronounce that Rehoboam was an evil king. Perhaps it was that the good things he did, that are recorded for us, were done not out of faithfulness to God, but faithfulness to Rehoboam. It is quite likely that his actions were self-serving, especially in the face of being wiped out by the Egyptians.

It is the flaws of Rehoboam that have defined his life, not his faithfulness. As we will see with the folks in Hebrews 11, it is their faithfulness that define their lives, not their flaws.

As we walk away from Rehoboam, and look towards the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11, we need ask ourselves the question of how our flaws and our faith

relate? Do we use God's love as an excuse, or as permission given, to be intentional in living out our flaws? Or do we recognize that our faithfulness can overpower our flaws so that they are not a hinderance in drawing closer to Him?

Let's pray.