

What Makes God's People Different

Intro: When one reads the Bible for the first time he becomes sometimes troublingly familiar with the moral turpitude of some of its greatest heroes. How do you react when you read that the "people of God" did things like this:

The moral failings of the people of God

One of them got drunk on wine and inadvertently exposed himself to his family.

One of them told half-truths to protect his life from another tribal leader.

One of them slept with the maid of his wife in order to have a child.

One of them laughed when told that God would give them a child.

One of them like his father used deception for self-protection.

One of them used deception to gain his father's blessing.

One of them stole her father's idols to assure her economic security.

One of them propositioned a harlot while out of town.

One of them proposed a covenant with a whole family and then slew them all in a disadvantageous moment.

One of them had sexual relations with the handmaid of his father's wife.

In fact, reading such things might cause one to wonder why such people would be called the people of God at all. We might imagine that God would be ashamed to even admit His association with such people who did such things. Yet the Hebrew writer makes this astounding statement about these very people!

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:16)

How can this be? Why would God be willing to make eternal provisions for such people who have been guilty of such serious sins?

Those same people who were clearly guilty at times of moral weakness and indiscretion were also credited at other times with having great faith in God and in His ability to bless.

By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. (Hebrews 11:7)

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; (Hebrews 11:11)

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; (Hebrews 11:17)

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. (Hebrews 11:20)

By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. (Hebrews 11:21)

As we review the people who had shown at times disappointing moral judgment, we also see that they were the same people who overcame momentary moral lapses and fears to perform great acts of faith. And it is for this reason, because of their faith, that the Hebrew writer says, "God is not ashamed to be called their God; and He has prepared a city for them." So the people of God can offer us some important reminders.

Important reminders about the people of God

The people of God are not perfect people.

The basis of God's acceptance of His people is His grace, and not human merit.

Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

If we look with a bit of moral disgust at the failings of others, we might well, in our more honest moments, admit that we too have done things that we would rather people not know about us. There will be times when we look back upon our lives and have to admit that we "blew it." We too are monuments to the grace of God.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In that sense the people of God are a testimony to the forgiveness and longsuffering of God toward weak and failing people.

Yet, the people of God are set apart from all others by their faith. There are things that the people of God do that make them different from all other people in this world. They do what these believers in God did.

They acknowledge God's existence as the basis of all reality.

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

God's people set themselves apart from all others by affirming that the world is the product of the creative work of God and came into existence from nothing. They acknowledge that they are His creation and that He has the right to determine their purpose and destiny.

They accept as fact what God said without sensual proof.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

There is an element of blindness in faith. I don't mean to say that faith is an existential leap in the dark. You don't say, "I don't know why I believe as I do, I just believe." Faith is built upon evidence. It is solid, intelligent, convincing evidence that you can know and see.

But then your own vision can only take you so far, and then you have to let God's eyes take over. You have to let him tell you what is, when you can't see what is! You have to let him tell you what will be, when you can't see what will be!

Noah couldn't see into the future. God didn't hand him a crystal ball or put him in a time machine and let him see the destruction of the world. Noah had to let God's eyes see for him. And without any sensual proof of that flood, Noah worked diligently, we may guess for decades.

God didn't have to show Abraham photographs of Canaan. He did have to hand him a map and say, "You see Canaan is a real place". All he had to do is say, "Go and I will show you."

So we too prepare for a judgment we have not seen. We look forward to being in a place we have not been. That's what sets the faithful apart. We believe that we will be held accountable to God and that having trusted in Him will live with him forever.

They depend upon the revelation of the Lord to know how to please Him.

What strikes you about the heroes in Hebrews 11, is that there is an obvious compliance with the wishes of God. When God made them a promise, he often asked them to do something to show their faith. They wanted to please the Lord.

Abel offered a better sacrifice. The question was: what pleases the Lord, and Abel offered what God revealed. Abraham went to Canaan, not to China, and offered up Isaac, not Ishmael.

That's what faithful people do! That's what sets them apart. They want to please the Lord and they listen to Him for instructions about what they need to do.

They seek to obey God instructions to the letter even if that means earthly hardship.

When you look at the heroes of Hebrew 11 it is clear that they were very serious about doing exactly what God said.

Noah in reverence prepared an ark... That ark had specifications that had to be followed. God revealed the proportions to result in a seaworthy barge-like cargo boat. Noah made no attempts to modify God's arrangements. No extra doors, no extra floors, no extra windows. Gen. 6:22 says it all.

Yet the requirements of God were not easy. Noah presumably worked for a long time building the ark. Abraham traveled for many months to reach Canaan. Moses endured hardship for

many decades in leading the people of God. Yet they patiently endured.

“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:11–12)

They want to be with God and go to heaven.

The common thread running through all of these experiences is that all of these people had one main goal in life. They wanted to live with God. The Hebrew writer captures this thought in a single sentence.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

This is how true faith acts. It says, “Lord, I want to be with you”.

Enoch's walked with God so closely until one day God said, "Just come on and live with me", v. 5.

And so that's what sets the people of God apart from all others. You show that desire to be with God by being here today, by serving Him each day. And one day that desire will be rewarded:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,” (1 Peter 1:3–4)

Conclusion: And so even though you can see in God's people things that are at times disappointing and maybe even downright embarrassing, it is good to remember that God graciously sees faith and on the basis of it, accepts sinful men as His children and prepares for them a city in which to live with Him. Such statements do not indicate that we may simply “sin that grace may abound.” Instead they challenge us to arise to faith in every area of our lives. For only then can we truly be called “the people of God.”

People often refuse the gospel for opposite reasons. Some say I'm too good to need God's forgiveness. Other's say, "I'm too bad to receive God's forgiveness." They both are wrong!

God's offer of salvation is for those who know they are not good enough to go to heaven without his forgiveness, but understand that He will continue to forgive their failings like the people we've talked about today.