

FAITH - 11: WHAT ABOUT US?

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

It's your turn.

When we began this series 12 weeks ago, I started off by talking about long distance runners who don't finish their races. Among themselves they talk about getting a DNF: did not finish. Sometimes they start too quickly and can't sustain the pace. Sometimes they get an injury and they can't continue. Sometimes they reach a point where they carry out a quick cost/benefit calculation: is it going to be worth it to finish this race.

Those of you who have done any running - even if it hasn't been too competitive - know what I'm talking about. Your calf muscles are talking to your head. You are dealing with the question of whether now would be a good time to stop and walk home, or hope that someone in a car stops to offer you a lift.

The book of Hebrews is written to some followers of Jesus who had come to recognise him out of a Jewish religious background and heritage. Following him had not been easy. The writer of this letter has decided to write to them because he wants to make sure that none of them gets a DNF: did not finish.

He wants them to keep on believing and one of the ways he encourages them is to work his way through the Old Testament and set out a list of stories that underline the significance of faith.

Let me read you a summary of what chapter 11 is about from a 19th century commentary on Hebrews.

“...the power of persevering faith, to enable men to do whatever God commands, however difficult,- to endure whatever God appoints, however severe,- and to obtain whatever God promises, however great and glorious, strange, and apparently unattainable.” John Brown (1784-1858). Commentary on Hebrews (1862)

All of the people in chapter 11 have lived their lives and run their races. The message of the start of chapter 12 is that now it is our turn.

The key command in the first two verses is “let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” The rest of the two verses tell us how to do that.

That's what we want to think about this morning. If you are a follower of the Lord Jesus, you are running a race. It is not a sprint where the prizes go to the people who are first out

of the starting blocks, it's a long distance race where the prizes go to the people who run with endurance and make it to the end. It's not an easy race: at times it will feel as though you are running on Portstewart Strand and the wind is whipping in from the Bar Mouth. That's why you'll need endurance.

There are three things that the two verses say about what it takes to run this race with endurance.

- We need to be aware of the witnesses.
- We need to get rid of the hindrances.
- We need to fix our eyes on the Saviour.

Be aware of the witnesses.

...we are surrounded by [a] great cloud of witnesses...

We need to think of ourselves as living our lives, or running our race, in an arena, a stadium. Sitting around that stadium, therefore surrounding us, is a great cloud of witnesses. These witnesses are the people that chapter 11 has been talking about. Think of it: Abel and Noah are sitting in the stadium: so is David. Daniel and his friends have taken their seats.

In the ancient Olympic games, the practice was that each winner received his first reward immediately after the competition, but there was an official ceremony on the last day of the games when the winner received his honours.

Think of the great crowd of witnesses who have finished their race and who are now waiting for us and waiting for the final day of the races when the great prize is awarded. (That may help us with the last two verses of Hebrews 11).

In what sense are these people witnesses?

There is a sense in which they are witnesses because their lives tell a story about the effectiveness of faith. That is what chapter 11 is about. We are surrounded by people who have powerful testimonies to tell.

In the church where I grew up, we sometimes had Sunday evening testimony meetings. Many of you know the style of thing I mean. The speaker would tell the story of coming to faith. To be honest, the most enjoyable ones were probably more often the stories where people had lived a fairly colourful existence before God caught up with them! Sometimes it probably felt like an anti-climax when they became Christians: the adventure stopped!

But in Hebrews 11 the adventure goes on. These people are witnesses of the power and significance of faith. As they sit in the stadium, they have a story to tell us.

But the other sense of the word witness is someone who is watching. We may not fully understand how this happens, but it looks as though these people from Hebrews 11 are watching us as we take our turn.

We run our race with an awareness of the witnesses. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us ... run with endurance the race that is set before us."

What is so powerful about these witnesses and their stories? Why should being aware of their witness and the fact that they are in the stands make a difference to our attitude as we run? How is their existence an incentive to us?

For one thing their presence as witnesses raises the bar. Think of a young footballer who get to play in the stadium of the team he supports, knowing that many of the past greats of the club are in the stands. Or think of a musician playing in a concert hall, knowing that

masters of her instrument are there to listen. They might be intimidated, but they will be inspired to reach their best.

But not only do these witnesses raise the bar by their presence, they show what can be done.

Their stories are powerful because of the way that they have points of contact with our stories. The extent of the challenges that many of them faced goes beyond what most of us face. None of us have literally been thrown to lions or thrown to the flames because of our unswerving commitment to God. But even though the extent might be different, there are points of contact. Some of you have been greatly encouraged in recent weeks because you have realised that you are not the first and only person to experience some of the things you have experienced.

The great cloud of witnesses can tell us stories of faith facing an uncertain future. Much of Abraham's testimony in Hebrews 11 has to do with trusting God for the future. Abraham learned to trust God when the future was uncertain (God called him to go to a place he didn't know); he learned to trust God when the future was very unlikely (God promised to give him and Sarah a son); and he had to trust God when it seemed that he was having to abandon any hope for the future (when God asked him to sacrifice his only Son).

The witnesses can talk to us about trusting God when we have to make choices that no one else is likely to understand. Moses would tell us about turning his back on all of the privileges and status he had in Egypt - something that made no sense in the normal run of things - because he believed that the future was in God's hands.

And some of us would be able to identify with Daniel and his friends who learned what it meant to stay loyal to God under pressure.

If you have had any of these experiences, there is a strength in knowing that there are witnesses who have proved that reliability and power of God. You are not alone. Your circumstances are not unique.

And I suspect that part of the encouragement of the witnesses is the fact that some of their stories did not have a positive ending. Faith wasn't a magic wand that cleared up every problem. Some of them were sawn in two. Some of them were killed by the sword. There is actually a relief in knowing that sometimes our faith helps us to endure, even when the hard times are not removed.

But I think that the stories are also powerful because of the extreme events they talk about. To be honest, while there are points of contact with our stories, as I said a few minutes ago, there are many places where they go beyond our experience. That is encouraging because it means that if God is able to sustain Daniel in a lions' den, he is also able to stand with you whatever you are facing. It's encouraging because if faith can enable someone to stay faithful to the point of being sawn in two, that same faith can sustain you in your trial.

As we run our race, we are surrounded by people whose lives speak volumes about what it means to keep on trusting God.

It's our turn. Let's run our race: with endurance.

Get rid of the hindrances

If you have ever run in a marathon, or some kind of organised fun run, you will probably have seen what you might call the novelty runners. It's the person who runs in a funny costume (like the Santa race that I think happens in Coleraine some time around Christmas), or the dad who decides to run while pushing a pram with a baby in it.

That was not how Greek athletes competed, although apparently there was one race where the athletes ran in armour.

As Hebrews 12 thinks about the Christian life in terms of a race, it's not encouraging the novelty runners. It's telling us to get rid of any kind of hindrance.

...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...

There are two problems that hinder effective running. One is what the writer calls "every weight" or every impediment and the other is what he calls "the sin which clings so closely."

You would expect him to encourage us to get rid of sin. There is nothing in the Bible that tells us to nurture our sin! In the race, sin is like running while wearing long flowing robes. The robes will hinder you and they may eventually trip you.

Jesus believed that sin could be such a hindrance that it needed to be dealt with radically. In the Sermon on the Mount he talked about dealing radically with sin and temptation. He talked about adultery and said that it is possible to commit adultery in your heart. If you are going to use your eye for that kind of thing, it would be better to get rid of your eye. And if your right hand causes you to sin, you'd be better to cut it off.

Tony Blair used to have a slogan about being tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. That's Jesus' message about sin.

I don't believe that Jesus was asking people to mutilate themselves, and at any rate he also taught that sin starts in our hearts, not outside us. But he was telling us that we need to be radical about areas in our lives where we are likely to stumble. If you are a business traveller who spends a lot of time alone in hotel rooms watching porn, you need to do something about it. Find somewhere else to stay. Make yourself accountable. Throw away the remote control.

Sin that is not dealt with will eventually trip you up.

While all of that is valid, there is actually a question here as to whether the writer has a particular sin in mind. What raises the question is that he literally talks about the sin that clings so closely. It's possible that that could vary from person to person. You may struggle with temptation in a certain area and the person sitting beside you would not really understand why it's a problem: their problem is something else. In that case you need to know what your besetting sin is and you need to know how you are going to deal with it.

But I think if the writer has one specific sin in his mind, one specific sin that could easily entangle the Hebrews and take them out of the race, it would probably be the sin of unbelief. What has he just been talking about at great length? Faith. Why? Because he wanted to make sure that none of his readers fell back into unbelief. That's how they wouldn't finish the race. That's how the OT people of Israel missed out on the Land of Promise: they didn't trust God.

It will be very hard to keep running your race if you stop trusting God.

Lay aside the sin which clings so closely.

But don't forget that that was the second thing to lay aside.

We also need to get rid of every weight.

...let us also lay aside every weight...

If "the sin" he's thinking about is unbelief, then any other sin would come under "every weight." But I think it can probably apply even further than that.

"Every weight" covers anything at all that makes it harder for you to run the race. This verse is telling us to get rid of anything at all that makes it harder to run the race. There is

probably no law against running the Belfast Marathon, or any other marathon, with a 20 kilo rucksack on your back. I doubt you'll see the winners run like that. When you see the people who win these events, there is hardly an ounce of fat on them, never mind a rucksack or a Santa suit.

If it is going to slow you down, or make it harder for you to run, get rid of it.

That's challenging because it could be very far reaching. Many of us have trained ourselves to think that if there is nothing actually sinful about something, then it's OK. If it's not forbidden, then I'll do it. I wonder how many of us could actually be running much more effectively than we are.

Be honest with yourself here. Are you spiritually flabby? Are you carrying extra weight? Is there a friendship or relationship that is holding you back? Is it the amount of time you give to a hobby, or watching TV?

One of the other NT references to life as a race is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9. He runs with discipline and focus. He does not want to be an also-ran.

It's our turn to run the race. Let's get rid of the hindrances.

Fix your eyes on the Saviour

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We'll run with greater perseverance as we are aware of them and their stories. But they are not meant to be our focal point. Look at verse 2:

...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Abraham might be a great source of encouragement to you and his story may inspire you: but you are not told to run with your eyes fixed on Abraham. Gideon might inspire you, but you are not told to run with your eyes fixed on Gideon. We are aware of these people and their stories urge us on, but none of them is meant to be our ultimate inspiration. We are to look to Jesus.

We look to Jesus because of who he is.

He is the founder and perfecter of our faith. As the founder and leader, he has got us started and he has paved the way. As the finisher and perfecter he is committed to seeing us through to the finishing line. It is Jesus who is waiting for us at the finishing line. It is Jesus who holds our prize.

Take your eyes off everything else and fix them on Jesus: he is the founder and perfecter of our faith.

We look to Jesus because of what he did.

One of the things about running a literal race is that there will be people watching and encouraging from the side who know nothing at all about what it is to run a race. They are well-meaning; they admire the runners and maybe wish it could be them out there, but they have never run a race; nor are they likely to!

We look to Jesus who ran a tougher race than we could imagine. He is our leader: he is the one who is waiting for us to finish.

What was his race? He endured the cross and despised the shame.

The race for some of the Hebrew readers meant shame and rejection and that is not an easy race. It's not easy to bear rejection. It's not easy to bear it when people who used to be your friends pour scorn on you. But that's what Jesus went through.

We can possibly start to imagine a small degree of the physical pain of the cross. In saying that, I don't mean to minimise the physical pain. It's just to say that if you have any idea what Roman crucifixion meant in terms of the physical treatment, then it's obvious that it would be excruciating. I think the shame is less obvious. To anyone who looked, the victim was humiliated, a spectacle. To the Roman mind, if you were on a cross, you were a low criminal. To the thinking Jewish mind, if you were on a cross, you were abandoned by God: you were actually under God's curse.

We often emphasise - quite correctly - that Jesus' death was a sacrifice on our behalf. He died for our sins. What we don't emphasise so much is that his death is also meant to be an example to us. The one who is waiting for us and who holds our prize went through worse places than the places our race takes us.

We look to Jesus because of where he is.

He has run his race: he has endured the cross and despised its shame. Now he has sat down. He hasn't just flopped down at the side of the track. He has sat down at the place of honour, at the right hand of the throne of God.

What was it that kept Jesus going? Why did he not give up and turn back? One answer to that was unswerving obedience to his Father. He would not disobey his Father. But you can obey in a grim, resigned way. Not Jesus. He went through with his race because of the joy that was set before him. There would be joy at the end of the race. That kept him running with perseverance the race that was set before him.

At that point we are practically back to where chapter 11 started: faith is the assurance of what we hope for. There is a worthwhile future for those who keep running.

Conclusion: faith and the future.

We finish the series by turning our eyes upon Jesus.

- Some of you have grown weary in the race. Learn to fix your eye on Jesus.
- Some of you have stumbled and fallen and don't know if you can get back up. Fix your eyes on Jesus.
- Some of you are worried that you might not be able to keep going to the end. Fix your eyes on Jesus.