

**FAITH FOR THE LONG HAUL**

Hebrews 12:1-3

**INTRODUCTION**

It is exciting to live by faith.

But sometimes living by faith is hard. I can think of two scenarios:

When God does not answer my faith quickly, or even at all on the earth.

That reminds me of what it says in:

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. Hebrews 11:13 <sup>NIV</sup>*

I have a list of people I have been praying for to come to Christ, some for over 20 years. I believe that God is going to answer my prayers. But at times, it can be discouraging, and my faith starts to weaken. I realize that I may not see the answer my prayers in this life.

Another scenario is having faith in the midst of persecution or when faith and living for Jesus makes life hard. Look at what these people went through as they lived by faith:

*There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. <sup>36</sup> Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup> 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. Hebrews 11:35-37 <sup>NIV</sup>*

The Bible is full of people being persecuted for their faith in God.

The Christians that the writer of Hebrews is writing to were in Rome and were undergoing persecution by the Roman emperor.

E.g. Andrew Brunson. He just got released from prison in Turkey where he has been for the past two years. He has been a pastor for over 20 years in Turkey. Two years ago, there was a Turkish coup attempt against the president, and thousands of Turkish citizens were put into prison, including Brunson. He was facing 35 years in prison, all because he was a Christian.

Sometimes, faith is hard to live out and maintain. Does that mean that faith sometimes doesn't work? Does that mean that God is playing games with us? Does that mean that only some people can live by faith and the rest of us shouldn't try?

No.

*Heb. 11:6: without faith it is impossible to please God.*

Faith pleases God. That's been our key truth in this series. If you want to please God, and I hope you do, you need to live by faith. You need to be trusting God.

Do you want to please God?

How can we keep our faith strong when God doesn't answer quickly, or when it is hard to keep faith in the face of persecution or hardship?

I want us to look at one of my favorite passages in the Bible: Heb 12:1-3. It's a bridge from all that was said about faith in Heb 11 to facing the reality of hardship and the Lord's discipline in Heb 12.

The author is trying to help us keep our faith strong. So how do we do that? God shows us five actions we can take.

## 1. Follow the examples of others

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses... Hebrews 12:1 <sup>NIV</sup>*

Examples are always helpful because they show us that living by faith can be done. If someone else did it, then so can we. That's why much of Heb 11 is filled with examples of men and women who lived by faith. It's like God is saying, "These people did it, and so can you."

E.g. several weeks ago, I talked about how God has moved me and my family across the country several times. And now in the next year, we will be looking to move again. Where? I don't know. But I read:

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. Hebrews 11:8 <sup>NIV</sup>*

Abraham lived by faith in moving from his home to a new place, and God was with him and showed him where to go. That encourages me. If Abraham did it, so can I.

God is telling us to live as others have lived. They went before us, and are like a great cloud of witnesses, not only giving us an example of living by faith, but also cheering us on, like spectators in a stadium.

You can build your faith and sustain your faith by reading Heb 11 over and over to follow the example of others. You can also read modern day men and women who have lived by faith.

The second action we can take is to:

## 2. Eliminate the non-essentials

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders... Hebrews 12:1 <sup>NIV</sup>*

The picture is how athletes competed back in the first century. In athletic contests, like the first Olympic games, the runners stripped down totally naked to run. They wanted to remove anything that might weigh them down or hinder them.

2018 Boston marathon winner: Yuki Kawauchi.

Lloyd Scott – 2002 London Marathon. He ran the race in a diver’s suit, complete with metal helmet. It took him 5 days to complete the race.

Are there some things that are slowing you down from living the way God wants, things that might be keeping you from trusting God fully? These are not sinful things, but things that keep us from living the way God wants or doing what God wants you to do.

I think one hindrance that many of us have is that we are unrealistic about our time and what we think we can do. Have you ever stopped to realize that you cannot do everything you want to do? That you cannot take advantage of all the opportunities that come your way? I’m not talking about bad things; I’m talking about good things. But good can often get in the way of what is best.

I especially think of you parents and all the opportunities that your kids have. Where do you draw the line? It’s hard to eliminate the nonessentials if we don’t know what the essentials are.

Here’s a beneficial exercise: take a sheet of paper and draw two lines dividing it into thirds. In the first column, write “Essential things”. Then in the middle column write, “Important things.” Then in the third column write “Nonessential Things.” Then look at your life and write down in each column those essential, important and non-essential things that you are presently involved with. My guess is that the nonessential column may be crowding out the middle column of important things.

My nightly routine: I like to read before I go to bed. I usually have a book to read; currently I’m reading the biography of Lewis and Clark as they explored the Pacific Northwest. But I also want to read the Bible as part of my desire to keep reading through the Bible. But one of the things I have to watch is to not let my enjoyment of reading other books crowd out my reading the Bible.

A third action we can take is to:

### **3. Eliminate any sin in our life**

*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**. Hebrews 12:1 <sup>NIV</sup>*

This should be obvious, but if we are doing anything sinful, then we are never going to be successful living by faith and following Jesus.

One of the goals of the Christian life is to progress in living holy lives. Down a bit in Heb. 12 it says:

*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 <sup>NIV</sup>*

One of the challenges we have in following Jesus is that the longer we live as Christians, the subtler are our sins that we still need to deal with. I think of pride,

self-centeredness, apathy, lack of love for others, harboring jealousy or being envious of others, not forgiving others. These are subtler sins, but they will easily entangle us and keep us from living with faith.

A fourth action we can take is to:

#### **4. Keep focused on Jesus**

Jesus, of course, is our perfect example. And while it is true that when Jesus was on the earth, he was still the Son of God, at the same time, he was also completely human, like you and me. That means he faced life with all the limitations of being human. It's like he is saying, I was able to do it, so can you.

The author tells us how Jesus can help us.

*And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:1-3 <sup>NIV</sup>*

Jesus is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

The word translated “pioneer” refers to someone who is the founder or the originator. Jesus established our faith. This is not talking about **the** faith, meaning the Christian faith. It is referring to each person's personal faith in Jesus. When you became a Christian, Jesus gave you the faith to believe in him. He was the founder of your faith. And now, Jesus is working to perfect your faith. He is working not only by giving us his example of how to live by faith, he is also helping us live by faith, if we will work with him.

Here's how we can keep focused on Jesus:

##### **We direct and redirect our eyes on Jesus**

The word for “fixing” is an interesting verb: ἀφορῶντες. It literally means to look away from something and to redirect one's attention. It means to turn away from other distractions so we can focus on Jesus.

Think of all the distractions there are around us. I think the #1 distraction most of us face every day is the media. Whether it is television, the computer, our smart phones—we are constantly bombarded with advertisements and messages that are focused on us and the world around us. At best, they are a distraction. At worst, these distractions pull us away from God. In any case, they distract us from following Jesus.

We are to purposefully look away from these things so we can look at Jesus.

One last action we can take is to:

#### **5. Keep the final goal in mind**

*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. Hebrews 12:2<sup>NIV</sup>*

What ultimately motivated Jesus to go to the cross and die for us? It was the goal that by doing this, he was going to fulfill God's purpose of making a way possible for us to have our sins forgiven. And that goal gave Jesus great joy. It was this joy of seeing us become children of God, that enabled Jesus to endure the shame of the cross, its physical pain, and the spiritual separation from his Father as he carried our sin.

Much of life—in fact many of the things in life that are most important—are not going to come easily or without sacrifice and even pain. E.g. to graduate from college is probably going to include a lot of sacrifice and pain to study and discipline ourselves. To succeed in a job is going to take effort and sacrifice. Parenting takes effort and sacrifice. Praying for a prodigal son or daughter is going to require endurance.

We are aware of these sacrifices and hardships in life, but why do we think that following Jesus is going to be different? Why do we think that the Christian life and living by faith will just be a cakewalk? Why do we think that knowing God in a deeper way is just something we can casually do and fit into our schedule when it's convenient? This isn't to minimize the grace and help that God gives us. But it is to say that if Jesus is our perfect example, and he is, that for the ultimate joy that he knew he would experience personally, and bring to us, he had first to go to the cross. He did not give up.

The writer of Hebrews is writing to Christians who were being persecuted. In ch. 10 he reminded these Christians:

*You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. Hebrews 10:34<sup>NIV</sup>*

Some of the Christians were thrown in prison. Some of the Christians had their homes and property confiscated. Being a Christian was hard. But they knew that Jesus gave them something much greater than they could ever get in the world, and they joyfully accepted what it cost. Their faith cost them on earth, but gave them eternal benefits.

Keeping our eyes focused on Jesus will give us the encouragement and endurance we need:

*Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:3<sup>NIV</sup>*

When we do this, we will not grow weary or lose heart. We will be able to endure and face whatever might come and we won't grow weary to the point of giving up.

Video of  
John Stephen Akhwari – 1968 Olympics in Mexico.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6oW9uYtJnA>

“My country did not send me 5000 miles to start the race they sent me 5000 miles to finish the race.”

God did not send us here to just start the Christian life, but to finish it. And we finish it by continuing to live by faith.

***Next Steps:***