

This morning, we are celebrating 30 years as a church. As I considered what to share on today to mark this occasion, I believe the Lord wanted me to share with you some encouragement from Hebrews 12:1-3. We do not know who wrote Hebrews, but we know that it is a letter written to the church made up of Jewish Christians in Rome, encouraging them to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of suffering. In the first three verses of chapter 12, we read this exhortation:

^{NIV} Hebrews 12:1 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. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Therefore – what is it there for? Follows Hebrews 11, the hall of faith, a long list of people found in the Old Testament who followed God by faith. Hebrews 11 begins with this explanation of what faith is:

^{NIV} Hebrews 11:1-3 - Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Look at the words he uses to describe faith: sure, certain. NOT blind, guessing, believing in something contrary to the evidence. The first example he gives is of God creating the universe – that out of what was unseen, God brought something tangible. **This is what faith is like, according to the author. It is being sure of something that you do not yet have, believing it is true even if the fulfillment is not going to happen until some unknown future time.**

Based on Hebrews 11-12, I would define faith this way: **Faith is a confidence in the character and promises of God that results in obedience to Him and to His Word.**

This is what we mean when we talk about faith, and about what it means to be faithful. I see four aspects of faithfulness in this passage that Paul encourages us with:

1) Draw strength from the great cloud of witnesses

^{NIV} Hebrews 12:1 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. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In this context, the “great cloud of witnesses” are the individuals listed in Hebrews 11 who have gone before them in the race of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. But for us, it also includes those who have gone before us at this church. Peter & Sheila, Kevin & Terry, Ron & Eva, Eddie & Jan. Those who are no longer with us, like Eve Christie and Shirley Prey and Brian Fearon and Phil Vaglica. It includes the missionaries our church supports. It includes those who have left our church but are still serving the Lord in other contexts. And it includes those whose faith has encouraged and inspired us in our own lives. The imagery is of running a race in a stadium, surrounded by those who have gone before us or who have prepared the way for us, watching and cheering us on, encouraging us to persevere in this difficult journey

What do we learn from the great cloud of witnesses? They were faithful without knowing what was to come, or when it didn't make sense. They were faithful even when it meant losing worldly wealth. Listen to the testimonies of those who have gone before you, and draw strength from the great cloud of witnesses.

2) Throw off everything that hinders & the sin that so easily entangles

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It is very hard to run a race weighed down by things you are carrying. If you're going to run by faith, you will need to let go of that which weighs you down. You

will need to repent of sin, let go of relationships that are pulling you away from God. You will need to drop habits that keep you stuck and do not allow you to move forward. Why waste your life on that which does not matter eternally? What is it this morning that is hindering you from running the race, from being faithful to Jesus?

3) Run with perseverance the race marked out for YOU.

^{NIV} Hebrews 12:1 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. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Run with perseverance, for the race is hard. Run the race marked out for YOU. The temptation is to live someone else's life, or to be like some other church. This happens all the time as a pastor. You hear about other churches who did things a certain way and experienced growth, and then they write a book to convince other churches to follow their example. But faithfulness involves running the race that is marked out for us. What is God calling us to?

Go back to Hebrews 11. Up until verse 34, there are many stirring things that happened to those who walked by faith. Abraham experienced God sparing his son Isaac's life. Moses left Egypt and experienced the parting of the Red Sea. Some conquered kingdoms, others shut the mouths of lions, still others escaped death. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. But then, in the midst of verse 35, comes the turn:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷ They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death 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, and in caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. ⁴⁰ God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Listen carefully to what the writer of Hebrews is saying: some ran their race of faith and experienced miracles and prosperity in this life. Others ran their race of faith just as faithfully and experienced persecution, poverty, and even death. Peter is imprisoned, the people pray, and God sends an earthquake and the doors of the jail open wide for him. John the Baptist is imprisoned, the people pray, and he is beheaded. Some Christians today follow Jesus and experience worldly blessing and prosperity. Others follow Him and are tortured and killed. One person stands up to share a testimony of God's miraculous healing from cancer. Others in their seats listen and wonder what they did wrong, because their prayers for healing seemingly went unanswered. One couple stands up to share about how God saved their marriage, while another feels the sting of divorce or an unsaved spouse, despite all the prayers.

Your race will not be the same as someone else's race. Think of Peter with Jesus after the resurrection:

***John 21:18-22** - I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" ²⁰ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") ²¹ When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" ²² Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."*

What does it matter to you how I lead someone else? You must follow me. You must run the race that is marked out for you, without comparing your race to someone else's.

Run the race that is marked out for YOU. Your race will not be like another's race. Which brings me to the last encouragement in Hebrews 12:

4) Fix your eyes on Jesus

*^{NIV} **Hebrews 12:1** 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. ² **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the*

throne of God. ³ *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

This life is hard. You will grow weary, and sometimes lose heart along the way. So fix your eyes on Jesus in order to help you be faithful. The Jesus who suffered for you. The Jesus who died for you. The Jesus who rose again and declares that all who live and believe in Him will have eternal life.

The writer of Hebrews references the joy set before Jesus that allowed Him to endure the cross, with all of its suffering and shame and opposition? He had everything in heaven. But he left the comfort and was willing to enter this suffering world for the one thing he did not have – you. The joy set before him was the joy of having you with Him forever. Fix your eyes on the one who loves you so much that He sacrificed himself in this rescue mission to save you.

And fix your eyes on the one who now sits at the right hand of God in heaven and has gone there to prepare a place for you. This life is not all there is. Jesus' life, death and resurrection show us that sometimes faithfulness does not see its reward in this life.

Faith is a confidence in the character and promises of God that results in obedience to Him and to His Word.

Look at the emphasis in this passage on future reward and heaven:

¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

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. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one.

²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward

³⁵ Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.

The call is to faithfulness. Life is hard

How do you endure a difficult marriage or a divorce? Because you know that Christ is your true spouse, that marriage is not the ultimate thing, but just a temporary sign pointing to the real love we will have with Christ for all eternity, that in the end will be the marriage supper of the lamb, that we will be His forever. And so we can endure and press on and walk by faith, knowing that this life is not all there is and that Christ has something better for us.

How do you endure poverty or being stuck in a job you hate? Because you know that you will have true riches and true meaning in your vocation for all eternity. You will reign with Christ forever and ever. The streets are made of gold. That's how wealthy heaven is.

How do you endure suffering, persecution, rejection? Because you know that on that day he will wipe every tear from your eyes, say "well done, good and faithful servant," and you will no longer experience sorrow, pain, suffering, or death, for the old order of things has passed away.

Draw strength from the great cloud of witnesses
Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles
Run with perseverance the race marked out for you
Fix your eyes on Jesus