



First Baptist Church Selmer

JESUS IS BETTER • JESUS, OUR MOTIVATION TO THE END • HEBREWS 11:32-12:3 •

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MAIN POINT

The Christian life requires us to persevere through faith in difficult circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How far back do you know your genealogy?

Have you ever spent much time mapping out your family tree? Did you find any interesting? What about things that perhaps you were not happy to know?

Was there someone in your family that was the first to be a Christian or active in a church?

Many years ago, around the 1930s, my grandfather, Willie Shelton wanted to go to church. Unfortunately, his parents and immediate family were not associated with a local church nor thought it was an important thing for their family. Around the age of 16, my grandfather moved in with another family nearby that would take him weekly to Chewalla Baptist Church. To much of his parent's disapproval, my grandfather would go on to be an active member, deacon, and serve his church faithfully over his lifetime.

The question remains for even my life today, where would I be or how important would a church family be to me if my grandfather had not established that legacy some ninety years ago? Was it easy for him? Not likely but his faithfulness through trying times was a pivotal moment in his life, his children's lives, and for many generations to follow.

Hebrews chapter 11 is well-known by Christians and has been labeled the "Hall of Faith". As many Jewish Christians reading the Book of Hebrews were scared of persecution

coming their way, some considered returning to the safety of Judaism since it wasn't under attack. But the unknown author of Hebrews argued that abandoning Christ wasn't an option for Christians. Hebrews encourages believers to persevere in faith much like the ones that preceded them in the generations before.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

In Hebrews 11, the author lists several Old Testament men and women who trusted God in unusual, difficult, dangerous, or deadly circumstances. Significantly, these events occurred in the lives of individuals after they were believers in God. The events were not acts of initial faith but acts of persevering faith, showing faith as a way of life for all of God's people. We will pick up towards the end of the listing of faithful men and women in the first part of Chapter 11.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ HEBREWS 11:32-38.

32 "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets - 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated - 38 of whom the world was not worthy - wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." (ESV)

These verses give a concise summary of some Old Testament heroes of faith. The author referred to individuals, actions, and experiences without extensive elaboration. He mentioned names and situations, assuming his Jewish Christian readers were familiar with the Old Testament stories.

Briefly share what you know about some of these Old Testament individuals. Do you have any favorite stories from the individuals listed

here?

From these verses, what can you identify in their lives that caused them to believe God and triumph in their circumstances?

What characteristics do they share with people you consider modern heroes of the Christian faith?

The hardships these Old Testament individuals faced teach us that faith expresses itself in obedience, courage, and endurance. Also, having faith does not guarantee a carefree life. Enduring pain requires more faith than escaping pain. As believers, we often experience circumstances in which it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but we can face these difficult situations with trust in God, who is present to help us.

How can we be encouraged that we too can be witnesses for future generations?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 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." (ESV)

The reference to the large crowd of witnesses looks back to the men and women of faith listed throughout chapter 11. However, they are not witnesses who watch us. Instead, we are to look at them as examples of the faith that God demands from His people. The author follows with an illustration of a distance runner to describe persevering faith.

Have you run a distance race? How did you prepare?

How is training for a distance run similar to the Christian life? What do we risk when we run the Christian life as a sprint?

Sprints require a relatively short burst of energy and effort, but a marathon demands endurance, sustained effort over the long haul. Believers need the power to finish and to persevere as they run the Christian race. Runners also need to stay focused on the end. The author explains our eyes must be on Jesus. When we remain focused on Him, we grow and mature in our faith.

What things keep us from being focused on Jesus? What is the best way to stay focused on Jesus throughout our lives?

Is it more difficult to get rid of the weight of sin or to keep our eyes focused on Jesus? Why are both necessary?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Jesus Himself is the supreme example of faith. His entire life was characterized by an unswerving trust in His Heavenly Father. This is how He endured a cross, and because of His faithful obedience to the Father, He has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.

When you think about what Christ and believers who followed Him before us endured, how does it shed new light on your own struggles in perseverance?

This week, how can we use our personal experiences with endurance to help those currently facing hardship?

PRAYER

Ask God to help your group persevere through faith no matter what difficulties we experience in life. Pray that He would help us keep our eyes constantly focused on Jesus.

COMMENTARY

| HEBREWS 11:32-12:3

Much as a preacher who must compress part of a message for the sake of time, in Hebrews 11:32-38 the writer gave concise yet thorough summary of Old Testament heroes of faith. He referred to individuals, actions, and experiences without extensive elaboration. He mentioned names and situations, assuming his Jewish Christian readers were familiar with the Old Testament accounts.

The writer listed Old Testament judges. These were champions or deliverers—mostly military leaders who freed their people from oppression. Gideon was a man of faith who obeyed God. Reluctantly and with misgivings about his abilities, Gideon led his small, vastly outnumbered force against the Midianites. He trusted God, and God granted victory. Barak agreed to lead an army against the forces of Jabin, king of Canaan, only if the prophetess Deborah went with him. With the assurance God had given the enemy into his hands, Barak defeated Jabin's better-equipped army and freed his people. Samson, a flawed man of tremendous strength, resisted the Philistines who oppressed his people, singlehandedly killing a large number of them. His final act against his enemy required faith. By God's power, Jephthah liberated his people from the Ammonites' oppression. To fulfill a tragically misguided and erroneous vow to God, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter. In this case, God used even misguided faith to accomplish His purpose.

The last heroes of faith listed by name are David and Samuel—last, but by no means least. Samuel was Israel's last Judge. He also was a priest and bridged the gap between the Judges and the kings. In addition, he was a link to the prophets. Samuel faithfully followed God's leading in anointing David to succeed Saul as Israel's king. David, Israel's greatest king, raised his nation to the pinnacle of power and prominence through military conquests.

To list all the prophets by name would have taken a lot of time and space, so the writer mentioned them as a group. These courageous men delivered God's messages of judgment and comfort to their people. They called for repentance and covenant loyalty; they addressed injustices and revealed that God expected His people to reflect His character and to live by His standards. The holy God demanded that His people be holy. The prophets' tasks were difficult and often dangerous, but they persevered in faith.

Without giving names, the writer referred to Old Testament saints who overcame a wide variety of difficulties by faith. Some conquered kingdoms (David); some administered justice (Samuel, Solomon, David); others obtained promises (Abraham; Israelites who entered the promised land); and some shut the mouths of lions (Daniel).

Who were the heroes of faith who quenched the raging of fire? The writer may have had in mind the three Hebrew young men who miraculously survived the super-heated furnace. David escaped the edge of the sword by hiding from Saul, and Elijah evaded Jezebel's clutches. Samson lost his power when Delilah cut his hair, but he gained strength after being weak. Many Old Testament leaders became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight as they fought Israel's enemies.

The statement that women received their dead raised to life again calls to mind Elijah's raising the widow's son and Elisha's raising the Shunammite woman's son. Verse 36 also could refer to numerous people of faith in the Old Testament and in the early years of the Christian movement who suffered because of their faith.

Death by stoning was a method of execution in Old Testament and New Testament times. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. Jewish tradition taught that Isaiah was sawed in two. Many of God's faithful people died by the sword, and others too numerous to be named suffered persecutions and afflictions. The writer here may have had in mind Elijah and Elisha.

The writer bluntly asserted that the world was not worthy of the people of faith to whom he referred. The sin-darkened world that opposed them did not deserve the brilliance of their godly lives. The so-called civilized society that hounded their steps and made them homeless nomads was not fit to be their home.

A large cloud of witnesses surrounded the readers. They had the examples of numerous Old Testament heroes of the faith whose lives testified that God's people can live in faith no matter what their circumstances may be. Because of this witness, the writer wanted his readers to prepare to run the grueling, demanding race of the Christian life. As runners removed clothing that might weigh them down and exhaust them quickly, Christians are to get rid of anything that slows their progress toward spiritual maturity. Even today, runners wear the least and the lightest possible clothing in a race.

The readers of Hebrews also were to lay aside sin that so easily could trip them. The image presented is of a runner removing any clothing that binds his legs and cause the runner to fall. The phrase "the sin" could refer to sin as a reality or to a particular sin that causes believers to stumble. Various weights hinder Christians in their race: bitterness, resentment, hatred, envy, critical and judgmental attitudes, malicious words, sinful acts, an unforgiving spirit, and failure to love as Jesus loves. These cause believers to lag behind in arrested spiritual development and effective service. Lack of compassion and failure to minister to others also cause Christians to falter and fall behind.

As believers run the long-distance race that is the Christian life, they should focus their attention on Jesus, who is the supreme model of faith. He is the source and perfecter of Christians' faith. He is the Author or Founder of faith. He also is faith's goal. He moves faith toward the goal of His character, His spiritual maturity. Paul expressed believers' goal as "a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:13). Knowing that Jesus makes salvation available and that He is active in believers' lives to help them grow spiritually emboldens Christians to live in faith.

Jesus is believers' greatest example of faith looking beyond present difficulties and suffering to future joy. The joy that lay before Him was completing His mission of providing salvation for all people who would place their faith in Him. He endured a cross—probably the most barbaric, excruciating, and humiliating method of execution ever devised—and despised its shame. Jesus disregarded or disdained the shame because the cross was the means of providing atonement for people's sins. Following His voluntary self-giving, Jesus was raised from death and exalted to God's right hand—a position of honor, majesty, and power. Faith encountered suffering and death and was victorious through God's power.