

Running the Marathon of Faith

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, well, I want to begin today by just making the observation that we have a tendency nowadays to focus on the subjective at the expense of the objective.
- And so we celebrate the fact that we're doing something, but then we don't give much thought as to the object of that action. If you want to know what I mean, well, consider the Beatles song. Some of you might be too young for this.
- All you need is love. Released in 1967, it basically says that provided you're motivated by love, then anything goes. Anything's fine.
- Don't worry about what you're loving or how. All that matters is that you love. But there's a problem with that, isn't there? Because what if you love evil?
- Or you love yourself to the exclusion of others, which is being narcissistic. Or what if you love money, which is greed?
- [1 : 0 0] Or all that you are of your race. That's racism. I'll take another example. Nowadays, whenever there's a disaster, politicians will stand up and without fail, they'll say this, won't they?
- Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims. Now again, we admire that sentiment. That's a noble sentiment. But have we ever stopped to think what kind of thoughts or prayers they have in mind?
- No doubt, good thoughts. But in this day and age, what does that mean? Likewise with prayers, is it enough to say we are praying? Because surely it matters who we pray to, right?
- Similarly, sometimes we Christians would talk about the power of prayer as if to say prayer itself is powerful. When really, prayer is only powerful or effective if we pray to someone who is.
- You don't pray to Mark Chu, for instance. It's not going to get you anywhere because I can't give you any of your needs. It's the same with any idol or false god.
- [2 : 0 7] But if you pray to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, well, that's a whole different matter, isn't it? Because then you've found someone who can answer your prayers.
- Of course, it's okay to sometimes speak in shorthand. So we sometimes say we're praying. And, you know, that's okay when we omit the object of the action sometimes.
- Because we're talking a common language. We know and understand each other. And such is the case here tonight with the subject of faith. You notice that the writer hasn't bothered to define the object of faith.
- It's just by faith, by faith, by faith. But that's because he spent the rest of the book, the last ten chapters, doing just that. He's actually said that Jesus is the one we're to have faith in.
- But it's important that we bear that in mind because so often I hear sermons on Hebrews 11 where the context is ignored. And so it just ends up being a sermon about having faith when what's required is faith in Jesus.

[3 : 13] And so with that important note in mind and keep that thought, let's turn to the first point tonight. Where we see the nature of faith being explained in the opening verses of chapter 11.

So verse 1. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. 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. Now these verses don't define faith so much as highlight two important aspects of it. Both of which are important to the task of persevering.

First, there's a close relationship between faith and hope. Faith, we read, is confidence in what we hope for. Or I think more precisely, it's the basis for our confidence in what we hope for.

What Christians hope for, eternal salvation, isn't wishful thinking but a secure hope. Why? Because it's founded on the work of Jesus.

[4 : 17] Something which they and we have already put our faith in. And so this race of faith they're running is a road that's already well laid out and paved by the blood of Jesus.

We're not, you know, to use an Aussie term, bush bashing to try and get there. But we're traveling on a clear and well signposted road.

And yet, the second aspect, the destination itself is unseen. The road is clear but the destination is unseen. And that's where the second aspect of faith comes in.

Faith, by definition, is belief in something that's unseen. So is the hope that springs from it if it relates to a future event. But there's also another unseen dimension to faith.

And that's due to the fact that faith requires that we believe in the unseen word of God. Which is why we have verse 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.

[5 : 25] Here, creation is actually a past event. And what has been created is now visible. All right? We can see one another. And yet, Christians still believe that the primary cause for this universe is God's word.

God's unseen word. It was by God's command, which is not visible, that this visible world has come into existence. And this is true regardless of how God brought this about physically, whether it's the Big Bang or something else.

The very impetus for the Big Bang, or whatever else it is, is God's unseen word. And so even though creation is a past event, it has this in common with faith and hope in a future event.

Both require belief in the unseen word of God. And this faith in the unseen word of God is now the focus of our next section, where we see each hero of the faith doing just that and being rewarded by God.

So look down there with me from verse 4 to 12. And what I've got is Devin, who's going to read it for us. He's going to read it from the back with a cordless mic.

[6 : 42] Hopefully it works. Cool. All right. We're looking from verse 4 in Hebrews 11. By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.

By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith, Enoch was taken from this life so that he did not experience death.

He could not be found because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

By faith... Oh, sorry. Keep going. Two ego. Keep going, seven. Thank you. Okay. All right. Verse 7.

By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear, built an ark to save his family. By his faith, he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

[7 : 54] 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.

By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. Thank you, David.

Verse 6 was the key verse, that's why I was a bit keen. But anyway, now we're looking at quite a long passage tonight, so I want to just say, just to set your expectations right, that we're merely going to have a highlights tour tonight of this passage, of this chapter.

[9 : 01] Now I'm sure that many of you would like to stop over every hero, linger and ponder each verse in detail, much like you would with, you know, paintings at an art gallery, you know, if you've just been to the Van Gogh and Seasons exhibition, you want to examine every detail, read the write-ups, listen to the audio.

But unfortunately, we're not going to have time for that tonight. And that's a bit of a shame, because there's so much here to feed and digest. Maybe we'll come back to it one year, where we just do a short series on this one chapter, but taking it in context, of course.

But for tonight, let me just try and give you the highlights of each section. And so here in our first section, as I said, the main point is actually found in verse 6, that without faith, it is impossible to please God, for God rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

And so as we read those verses, each of our heroes has just done that. They've lived by faith, they were commanded by God, and that is, He was pleased with them, and therefore were rewarded in some shape or form.

So Abel offered a better sacrifice by faith, and was commended and spoken well by God. Enoch walked with God, that's the language that's used in Genesis chapter 5, which is just another way of saying he lived by faith, and so as a reward, was taken away without experiencing death.

[10 : 25] Noah obeyed God when warned about things unseen, namely the flood. And again, because he obeyed by building an ark, he became, as the writer of Hebrews says, an heir to righteousness, and was saved from the world's condemnation.

And then finally, we have Abraham, who went out by faith, even though he didn't know where he would go. And so although he and Sarah was barren, he was rewarded as a father.

He became a father to a son, so that he may then have many descendants, as numerous as the stars and the sand of the seashore. And if we think about it a little, it's not hard to see why faith pleases God, because faith recognizes God for who He is.

Unseen though He is, faith believes that He exists, firstly, and it looks to Him to provide us with everything good. In other words, faith treats God as the source of all reward.

Which is why to live by faith, and not to live a perfect life, or to just do good deeds, is actually the most important thing a Christian can do.

[11 : 40] It's the most basic requirement of you as a Christian, as well as a lifelong commitment. As Christians, we're called to live by faith.

And yet in practice, we often resist that, don't we? I say that, for example, because whenever our faith is tested, instead of thinking, instead of thanking God for it, we start to question God, don't we?

As to why we have to go through this. And instead of being patient and waiting on God by faith, what we want Him to do is take our problems away, straight away, so that we can sort of get back to life, as if living by faith is not life.

And I myself fall into the trap of thinking that the good times in life are when God is blessing me. That's when I'm closest to God, whereas the so-called bad times, you know, when we're sick or poor or lonely, those are the times when I feel that God has turned His back on me.

But if these so-called bad times of testing are what enables us to exercise faith in God, then they're really opportunities to please God, aren't they?

[12 : 55] To put a smile on His face so that He will reward us. And so really, I think we need to look at trials and testing very differently, shouldn't we?

I'm not saying it's easy, but we should actually look at them as opportunities to please God with our faith, to obey Him, to do exactly what He wants.

Now, I want to come back to Abraham a little more because I think Abraham is a special hero of the faith. In part, it's because he crosses from this section into the next as well, but also I think he's special because of the nature of Abraham's reward.

You see, unlike the others, Abraham actually didn't live to receive what he was promised, not fully anyway. If you remember that first reading that Karen gave us tonight from Genesis 12, which I'll put up on the slide again, God promised him the land in verse 7.

And yet here in verse 9, we find that he lives as a stranger in that land, in that promised land. Likewise, in Genesis 12 and verse 2, God promised Abraham would be a great nation.

[14 : 09] But again, all he saw was the birth of Isaac, one son, hardly a great nation. Abraham's example then forms a bit of a template for all the other heroes in the next section.

Their lives have this same pattern of living by faith, often at great cost to themselves, and yet not receiving the promise. And so these are the two things I'd like you to just see if you can take note of as Devin reads from verses 13 to 14 now.

So one, look out for them not receiving their promised reward. And secondly, look out for their willingness to forgo reward now or suffer loss even to the point of death.

And I'll put those two points on the slide just in case you need to look up and refer to them again. So, Devin, thank you. I'll promise not to interrupt you before the end.

Thank you. 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.

[15 : 18] People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. Even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead and so, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead. By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

By faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

[16 : 30] By faith, Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born because they saw he was no ordinary child and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

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. By faith, he left Egypt not fearing the king's anger.

He persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith, he kept the Passover and the application of the blood so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

By faith, the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. By faith, the walls of Jericho fell after the army had marched around them for seven days.

[17 : 34] By faith, the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, whose weakness was turned to strength, and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might again, they might gain an even better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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.

The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground. They were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Thanks, Devin. I should say one more thing about Abraham, and that is God's promise to him actually becomes the basis for the promises of the others as well.

[19 : 13] So that promise that was given in Genesis 12 actually becomes the foundation on which future promises to his descendants were given, you know, to Moses, to David, and so on and so forth, and ultimately to all humanity because we were there as all peoples in Genesis 12 and verse 3.

That's why we read here earlier actually in verse 9 that Isaac and Jacob are described as heirs of the same promise. And so too were Joseph and Moses and Rahab and everyone else, all of them are actually heirs to Abraham's promise.

And while it may appear from reading Genesis 12 that this promise relates to the promise of a physical land in Canaan, when we read this here, Abraham was actually looking to something better, not the physical land, for it says in verse 9 that Abraham was looking for a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

it's a heavenly city. And then we discover soon in verse 16 that this was what the others were doing as well. They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one which God has prepared for them.

And proof of this faith and hope in this something better is shown by the fact that they were willing to endure hardship and suffering in this life. The logic being that if they didn't have this hope of a better life in future, they wouldn't be able to put up with the deprivations now.

[20 : 51] They would, in verse 15, return to the country they left. If all you have is this life, then you want to live, you want to get the most out of this life, wouldn't you?

But instead, Moses chose mistreatment with his people, verse 25, rather than the pleasures of sin in Egypt. Likewise, Rahab, in verse 31, chose to side with her enemies, always a risky thing to do with the spies because she had heard of God's promises to Israel and she said, I want to be part of that rather than be part of this land in Jericho or this city in Jericho.

And all the other examples in verse 32 onwards show the extent to which these heroes were willing to suffer now in this life. So, you know, you have torture, imprisonment, stoning, sowing in two.

Some even refused to be released. What an amazing statement. Verse 35, all because they were looking to a better resurrection. They were looking to something better and that's why they could do what they did now.

And Christians across the ages have all shown this willingness to suffer, fueled only by the promise of something better, fueled by faith in an unseen God and His unseen Word.

[22 : 09] But they dared to do this. They dared to stake their lives on it because they knew that this God, this God who promised is faithful. And so this is the same faith and this is the same race that we're called to as well.

That's why we end the section as it does. Verse 39, these were all commended for their faith yet none of them received what had been promised. And the reason for that, because God had planned something better for us, not them, for us, so that together with us, only together with us would they be made perfect.

God's promise or God's promises weren't just given to them, but it was given to us as well. We stand to share in them in the same way that they did.

by a faith that pleases God by longing for a better country. That's our calling as well. That's our race as well. And yet, at the same time, being willing to suffer now.

Both they and us have this reward. And we have this because, as we've been learning over the last few weeks, of the new and living way that Jesus has opened for us by his death.

[23 : 31] And so, we actually come to this reward, this heavenly country, not as little individuals, but as one people of God.

You know, Abraham and Moses, if you think about it, they're not just some ancient characters that you find in the dusty pages of the Bible. They're actually co-heirs with us of God's promises.

Same with Rahab, David, and all the others. We're all in this together. One day, we'll get to that city and we'll all be, you know, I don't know, ah, that's Abraham.

That's Rahab. Imagine. Oh, can't wait, actually. He may not recognize me, but I'll recognize him. Anyway, so that's why the reader now turns to rally us to persevere in this marathon of faith.

And so, let's go to the final section now, third point. We read from verse 1 of chapter 12. 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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

[24 : 44] 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So, there's two things we are urged to do here. First, in verse 1, to throw off every hindrance and the sin that entangles and then secondly, while fixing our eyes on Jesus, verse 2, we're to consider him so that we will not grow weary or lose heart.

Verse 3. And both of these things was exactly what the heroes did as well. That's why they formed this great cloud of witness. Not in the sense of, you know, I always thought when I was young that, you know, they're sitting in some heavenly stadium, you know, sitting on the clouds kind of thing, and then they're looking down on us, cheering us to finish the race.

But I don't think that's what the picture is. Rather, the cloud just means a crowd, okay, a big multitude. And what it is that they're witnessing to is that their lives themselves testify to us how we should live our faith.

So that if we follow them, we too will receive the same commendation from God as they did, and we will share in God's reward with them. So, you know, now being Wimbledon and Tennessee, it's a bit like, you know, if you're a finalist at the Australian Open, each year, as they walk out onto Rod Laver Arena, if you've seen a corridor, yeah, they will pass this corridor of past champions, won't they?

[26 : 15] And as they do, they take inspiration from these champions. They will look and they remember the courage and the feats of heroism, you know, those five setters that Nadal and Federer went into, and how they dug deep, and then how they came up on top.

And they think, ah, if only I could play like them, if only I would sort of do the same things they did, then I will have a place in tennis history as well.

I'll be crowned Aussie Open champion. And that's the same for us, except that our place will be, we will have a place in salvation history, not tennis history.

And what that means for us in action is to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Now, the sin here is not actually defined or specified, although I think my view is that it's not just one particular sin so much as any sin which entangles and hinders our faith.

It could be perhaps the sin of unbelief, which is like the foundational sin which we saw last week was linked to shrinking back in the last chapter. But whatever it is, what is clear is that as long as something is entangling us and hindering our race of faith, then we need to get rid of it.

[27 : 39] That's how serious it is. Let's not get sentimental about holding on to things, but let's get rid of anything that weighs us down. If you ask any runner in a physical race, this is what they would do themselves, right?

Some of you are running, going to run Melbourne, is that what it's called this year? Now, if you ran that race, would you weigh yourself down in the race unnecessarily, like carrying a backpack or wearing a thick overcoat as you're running?

You wouldn't, wouldn't you? And so neither should we in this case. In fact, I think the ancients, the Greeks or whatever, they used to run naked or nearly naked so that as not to be encumbered.

Now, for us, our race is not one of being naked, but we are to be in one sense naked in the sense of not having anything that weighs us down or any sinful pleasures of this world, like the ones that Moses was enticed with in Egypt.

Or perhaps we're not supposed to have things that chain our hearts to this world, because they are weights. They may be cares or worries of this life, perhaps the need to protect our material possession or status or comfort in this world at all cost.

[28 : 57] These are the things that we're being encouraged to just let go of. But that's not the race, that's the race that we should be running because we've actually got something better in store for us, isn't it?

There's no point capturing or putting our hearts in the treasures of this life because the treasures of the next life, of our heavenly country, is actually much better. It's actually where God will dwell and richly reward us.

However, if we are to empty our minds and our hearts of things that hinder, then we also need to fill it with something else, and that something else or someone else is Jesus.

After all, he's the one that makes it all possible because he died for us, and he's given us this firm foundation to secure our hope. But here he's also described as the pioneer of our faith in the sense of he's someone who's led by example.

If the heroes of the faith are inspirational, then how much more Jesus' own faithfulness to God? He suffered as well to receive his reward. He looked to the joy that was set before him, and because of that he willingly endured the cross and scorned the shame in order to receive the reward of being exalted to God's right hand.

[30 : 21] And now, now that he's seated on God's right hand, Jesus is also the perfecter of our faith in the sense that he's going to bring our faith to completion when we finally enter into God's eternal country.

And the more we are able to fix our eyes on Jesus and on the throne that he now occupies, the more resolve we will have to persevere. When we see what we're going to receive when we get there, then we will not grow weary or lose heart.

We will not think, oh, I can't get there, it's too far. No, we'll say, look, it's nearly there, I can see it, I know what I'm getting to, I will persevere, I will not grow weary or lose heart.

Many long distance runners tell me that the thing in running is to get into the zone. Any long distance runners here? Anyone understand or experience running in the zone?

No? It's that place that they get to where they're so focused on the run that they're able to just push through the pain barrier. They just keep going despite the buildup of lactic acid, the tightness in their muscles, the pain.

[31 : 35] They're running in the zone so much so that they just keep going one after another. And I suppose we could speak that way about our own life, about being in the zone when it comes to faith.

And that's when we are so focused in life on Jesus, we're so committed to living for him, that actually if there's suffering or there's hardship, we think nothing of forgoing pleasures and comfort in order actually to finish this marathon of faith.

I know it sounds a bit strange because last week I did say that our reward for our faith is coming soon and then now this week I've said we're actually running on this marathon of faith.

Well, both are true because even though Christ's return is imminent, it could come anytime, and God will not delay it any longer than is necessary, the mindset that we have, that we should have is actually one of perseverance.

That is, we should be running as though this is a marathon so that we will not lose heart, so that we will not give up just before it happens, the end happens.

[32 : 41] But we keep going no matter how hard this life is, no matter what pleasures we have to forgo in this life. But it gets easier the more we fix our eyes on Jesus.

The more we immerse ourselves in the promises of God, the more we are able to see clearly what we are running to. That's why I want to encourage you that when you read the Bible, don't focus first of all on what you have to do.

Those things are important, but focus first of all on the promises of God. Feed on the promises of God and let those promises fill your heart so you can see clearly God's reward for you in the better country.

And when that grips your heart, then you will willingly suffer loss no matter what, just as the heroes of the faith did. So please fill yourself with God's word, God's promises, so that you can see clearly the reward that is ahead of you.

Let's pray. Father, we want to thank you again for Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of faith. Thank you that he himself endured the cross so that he can save us, so that he can be exalted to the right hand, to your right hand.

[33 : 59] Help us to follow in his example. Help us to see that the road has been laid for us because of his blood. And all we need to do is take one step at a time, throwing off everything that hinders and fixing our eyes on the prize on Jesus.

We pray this in his name, in the name of Jesus. Amen.