

Faith looking to Christ

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have the Bibles there, we're on page 1008, and we're, as I say, coming to our final study in Hebrews 11, this great chapter, which we've called Faith in a Faithful God.

Our author has been going through the great figures of the Old Testament, particularly Abraham and Moses. And now in verse 32, he has a quick summary of really the rest of the Old Testament in a verse, and then he goes, he brings the story up to his own day.

And we're reading from 11 verse 32 until 12 verse 3. 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.

Who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 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.

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life.

[1 : 21] Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 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, of whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

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

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

Consider him, who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Amen. That is the word of the Lord, and may he speak to our hearts and challenge our lives through it.

[2 : 48] For nearly 14 years, I lived and worked in England, and during that time I visited many different churches. And some of them, I've never actually seen this in Scotland, but in some of the English churches I visited, there was on the lectern, or on the pulpit, visible only to the preacher, these words written, Sir, we want to see Jesus.

These were words that were spoken by some Greeks in John's Gospel, chapter 12, who come to Philip, the apostle, and say, Sir, we want to see Jesus.

And that is an important reminder to the preacher, what he's there for, to lead people to Jesus Christ himself. And that's why I've carried on the reading today into chapter 12, verse 3.

Remember, the chapter divisions are not inspired, and 12, verses 1 to 3, is as naturally the climax of chapter 11, as it is of the beginning of chapter 12.

And over this letter could be written, Sir, we want to see Jesus, because that's what the life of faith is about. The life of faith, and the goal of the life of faith.

[4 : 04] I'm always slightly amused when I read the letter to the Hebrews, 3, chapter 13, verse 22, where the author says to you, I have written only a short letter. I think if we had written a letter as long as the letter to the Hebrews, we would feel we had done justice to our subject.

But the author is surely saying the subject is so vast, it's the whole drama of salvation, the whole life of faith, the whole journey from, if you like, creation to new creation.

And if that's the case, then it is a short letter. Now we're going to concentrate on chapter 12, verses 1 to 3, but just a quick word about verses 32 to 40.

Notice the rhetorical trick in verse 32. What more shall I say? And then he goes on at some length. Never listen to a preacher who says, finally, it's just a rhetorical trick.

Paul says it in the middle of Philippians when there's half the letter to go. But once again, it's there for a purpose. What more shall I say? In the sense that there is so much that could be said, But the author is now going to bring us face to face with Christ, the author, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

[5 : 22] And he goes beyond the Old Testament now up to his own time. And indeed, considerably beyond that too, right up to our own day. But it's verse 39 and 40.

All these, he says, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us, they should not be made perfect. This sums up so much of the chapter. Unlike those great heroes and heroines of early days of the Old Testament period, we actually live after the cross and the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit.

The gospel, which they saw only dimly, in some cases more clearly than others, we have seen because we have had Jesus Christ preach to us.

And that really is what these verses are about now. Faith means looking to Christ. Faith in a faithful God means looking to Christ. So as we look at these verses, which conclude the chapter, and bring us up to chapter 12, verse 3, I want to say three things.

[6 : 37] First of all, let's look at the spectators. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. The picture here is of spectators in an arena, watching the athletes as they run.

And if you watch the London Marathon and similar activities, the route is always lined with spectators. Now this great cloud of witnesses is later mentioned in verse 23 of chapter 12, where they are called the Church of the Firstborn, the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

And that great cloud has grown considerably since the author wrote. That includes all those of faith, known and unknown, of the past two millennia.

It is indeed a great cloud of witnesses. Cloud suggests both those great numbers, but also the basic unity. These were all people who had faith in a faithful God.

The word witness in Greek is the word *martus*, from which we get the word martyr. And probably already at this stage in the New Testament story, the word *martus*, the word witness, is beginning to develop that significance.

[7 : 56] Because we, the word martyr, coming from the word martyr, to suggest somebody who had risked everything and given everything for their faith. So, what do they witness to this great cloud of witnesses?

They witness to the reality of the life of faith. Basically, they are saying, we made it. It's not a delusion. It's not a dream. It's real.

They saw, as Moses did, as we saw last week, him who is invisible. There, the fact that they are at the goal now, the fact that they have reached the finishing post, shows that the life of faith is not a vain and empty delusion.

The life of faith witnesses to the reality of the unseen world and the invisible Lord. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And I'm pretty certain, nearly everybody, probably everybody here, can think of someone they know and love, who is part of that great cloud of witnesses as well.

But secondly, let's look at the runners. Let us. The author is not going to allow us to sit gazing at the great cloud of witnesses. He says, let us lay aside, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings to us so closely.

[9 : 15] Let us run with endurance. Now, the idea is not that we are competing with each other. It's not like the marathon where we'll be in the elite women or the elite men and finish in a shorter time.

The idea is of priorities. Let us run the race that is set before us. And there are two things we must do as we run that race. First of all, we must lay aside every weight, everything that hinders.

There's no point in running with a huge rucksack on your back, carrying all kinds of baggage with you. Now, what does that mean, every weight? And I want to suggest it means anything at all that hinders us living the Christian life.

It could be our job. It could be our relationships. It could be a leisure activity. Not things that are wrong in themselves, but things which are taking up so much time, things which are so taking over our lives, that we're no longer running the race.

It does... And lay aside. Now, that doesn't mean, obviously, we have to give up our job, give up our relationships, and so on. What it does mean is there must be a true priority.

[10:19] We must keep our eyes fixed on the goal. We must get it in the right perspective. That's the first thing. But also, we have to lay aside sin which clings to us so closely.

The old version says our besetting sin, which has become a proverbial phrase. Now, that could mean a specific sin. It could mean a sin that's specific to me, but not to you.

It could mean a sin that, at some times in your life, is really a problem, at other times isn't. But it may be more than that. But earlier on in the letter, back in chapter 3, verse 12, our author had talked about an evil, unbelieving heart, which leads you to fall away from the living God.

In other words, the opposite of the life of faith. If you read through this letter, you'll find what the author does is this. He takes the story of the Israelites in the desert, the desert wanderings of Israel, and he makes an extended comparison of these with the church he's writing to, the house churches in Rome.

Now, that generation in the desert didn't make it. Only two of them did, Joshua and Caleb. They fell away. And the author is terrified that the people of his time are going to do that.

[11:37] So it may well be that the sin which clings so closely is a specific sin, unbelief, which is the opposite of faith.

A different way to live, a different way to act. See, part of the problem of the Christian life, isn't it, is this, that when we become a Christian, particularly when we're young, first of all, everything seems wonderful.

Everything is new. Everything is fresh. And very often, God in his goodness allows that to happen for some time. Nothing seems a problem. Nothing seems a burden.

But then, sooner or later, problems begin. Difficulties emerge. Temptations threaten to overwhelm us. And we swing from the extreme of thinking the Christian life is easy to the opposite extreme and saying it's impossible.

Now, our author says it's not easy. It's not impossible. It's difficult. But there are those at the goal. They've made it. And we must keep on running as well.

[12:37] So, we've got the spectators. We've got the runners. But let's look thirdly at the founder and perfecter, the author and finisher. Words are translated differently in different versions.

Who is he? He is Jesus. Verse 2. Nowhere in the New Testament is there such a strong emphasis as in Hebrews on the fact that Jesus is one with God.

That he is God in the flesh. But here, the author is specifically using the human name. The man Jesus of Nazareth, who himself ran the race and reached the goal.

I think that's the point. Looking to Jesus. Not looking to the Lord. Not even looking to the Lord Jesus Christ. But looking to Jesus. He ran the race as well. And he is at the goal. And he's not only at the goal, but he's alongside to help.

And there's two particular things I want to say about this. First of all, the author says, looking to Jesus. Now, the word here is an unusual word.

[13:38] It's only used here in the New Testament. And it means looking away from, towards. Look away from, towards Jesus. And the obvious answer is, who or what are we to look away from, towards Jesus, as we run the race.

Now, some commentators say it's obvious. We look away from the weights. We look away from the sin. Now, that's true enough. But that's rather trite, isn't it? That doesn't seem to be a development of thought so much as simply a repetition.

I want to suggest something different. I think what our author is saying is this. Look away from the great cloud of witnesses themselves. You won't run well by looking over your shoulder.

You'll only run well if you fix your eyes on Jesus. Be inspired by them. Their stories are wonderful. Read them in the Bible. Read them in church history. Read them in present day accounts of thrilling exploits, which people do in the name of Christ.

But don't keep on looking at them. Look away from them. There is only one to look to. There is only one who will ultimately bring us to the goal.

[14:48] And I think that's what the phrase looking to Jesus means. But the second thing is in verse 3. Consider him. This word consider means something like calculate, estimate.

Look closely at him. Now, when you think of Jesus' earthly life, it wasn't at all like, say, the earthly life of the queen and other senior members of the royal family.

It must be awful being the queen sometimes, but it must also be great never having to take money in your pocket, never having to queue for anything, never having to take these kind of decisions, never having to decide what you're going to wear or what you're going to eat.

There are moments, I'm sure, when all of us would love that kind of thing. Nevertheless, that did not happen in Jesus' earthly life. Jesus' earthly life was not characterized by being shielded, by being protected from these things.

He endured rather hostility, opposition. And I don't like the old word there, contradiction. Because that's what we experience much more in this country than opposition and hostility.

[15:58] You read the papers, you watch the media. The media are uniformly hostile to evangelical Christianity. From the whole across the spectrum.

And there's an awful lot of contradiction around. Contradiction in the sense of a lot of sneering, a lot of denigrating and demeaning of Christianity.

That's what we are faced with today in Britain and in the West in general as we run the race of faith. So how are we going to keep going? Our author says, consider him so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

Now he's already told us in the rest of the letter the way in which we enter the life of faith is because he made a sacrifice for us, a better sacrifice. And as we come to him, as we sang, to him we come. Him we come so that our sins can be forgiven. And we can become part of his family. In him we live, for him we go, with him we serve. And onward we go, to the last with joy we'll see.

[17:07] I just want to finish on this point. This, consider him, in many ways sums up the chapter. We have considered Abraham and Moses and others. They've been inspirational, what their lives say.

But our author doesn't say consider Abraham and Moses. They are not seated at the right hand of the throne of God. They are part of the great cloud of witnesses. Wherever we are, suppose you're not sure even whether you want to begin the life of faith.

Suppose you're interested. Suppose you've dipped your toe in the water, so to speak. Then our author says, consider him. If you're not sure that you can make it, of course you can't make it. But he, you don't have to make it. He is the one. If you give your life to him, it will bring you to the goal. Suppose you've just begun the Christian life, maybe a few months ago. And you're finding it difficult.

Problems are arising. Temptations are overwhelming. Things are going badly. Then, says our author, consider him. What if you're growing old and rather weary of the Christian life?

[18:16] You're wondering if it's all been worth it, all those years of discipleship. Our author says, consider him. Whatever you may be, whether you're new, whether you're just beginning the Christian life, whether you're finding it pressurized, whether you're beginning to wonder if it's been worth it at all, our author says, consider him, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

Because, as we said at the very beginning of this series, it's not our faith, ultimately. It's God's faithfulness. Our faith puts our weakness in touch with his faithfulness.

So, as we conclude this series, let's conclude it with these words ringing in our minds. Consider him. Let's pray. God our Father, help us indeed to consider him, to run with patience the race set before us, and to look not at the great clouds of witnesses, but at the Lord Christ himself, living in him, working for him, till at the last with joy we'll see Jesus in glorious majesty.

Thank you for your word, and take us now back into our normal activities with renewed hope. Help us indeed to consider him. Amen.