

Fitting yourself for the future

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to be looking this evening at the letter to the Hebrews, and perhaps you would turn with me now to Hebrews chapter 11. Josh Johnson, our apprentice, is going to be bringing us God's Word this evening, and we're looking at Hebrews 11, but beginning to read at the end of chapter 10, and a little bit into chapter 12, just so that we get the sense.

So I'm going to read Hebrews chapter 10 at verse 32, I think that's page 1007, if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, and through to Hebrews 12, verse 3.

So the writer writing to this group of, we presume, believers from a Jewish background to encourage them not to slip back, not to be tempted back into the enticing ways of the visible religion and practices of their past.

He says this, recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

[1 : 37] Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward, for you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

For yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay, but my righteous one shall live by faith. And if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

But we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

For by it, that is by faith, the people of old received their commendation. By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

By faith, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.

[2 : 47] And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith, Enoch was taken up, so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him.

Now before he was taken, he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith, it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

By faith, Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear, constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By this, he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes through faith. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

By faith, he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

[4 : 03] By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. And therefore, from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants, as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they'd been thinking of that land from which they'd gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.

But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. And therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

[5 : 20] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each one of his sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw that the child was beautiful and that they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith, he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

By faith, he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. By faith, the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

[6 : 50] By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been circled for seven days. By faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

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 and forced 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.

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.

[8 : 29] Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, every sin which clings so closely.

And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Good evening.

As you turn up again our passage in Hebrews, let us pray. Heavenly Father, as we come to your word tonight, would your spirit be with us?

[9 : 45] Would he teach us what we don't know? But Lord, would he help us to believe that which we would not do so easily? And so in light of this, may we be changed, that we would long to exalt Christ much more than ourselves.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I wonder if you've come out this evening feeling flat and in need of spiritual refreshment.

After a long time as a Christian, are you finding that life is hard? Many of us will resonate with that. Many of you will think you are not doing this Christian thing very well because it's hard. Is this really the best way to live? Maybe you're like me.

Whenever the Christian life is referred to as a race, like in our passage this evening, you automatically think of Mo Farah and cringe because you're nothing like him.

[10:52] You're maybe more like I was with the long-distance runs at school. The slightly overweight, asthmatic kid struggling along at the back, wanting any reason to give up.

And there are many times in the Christian life where we'll feel like that. We feel much more like the unsporty asthmatic at the back of the race with little hope of finishing than we feel anything close to someone like Mo Farah winning the race and making the long, hard slog seem doable.

Well, thankfully, our passage tonight says three things about the race of the Christian life. It says that we must endure. It shows us how to endure.

And finally, it says that we can endure. You see, where we're picking up tonight comes after ten chapters of Hebrews that have been explaining and unpacking the new covenant.

Ten chapters that have been showing Jesus as far greater than the Old Testament priestly system. Ten chapters of showing Jesus as our great high priest, our sacrifice, who now sits at the right hand of the Father because his work is complete.

[12:16] And yet after these ten chapters that say that Christ is better, it seems like the Christians receiving this letter are struggling to believe that.

Are we always able to say that Christ is better? Or are we often left wondering, why doesn't it feel like he is better? Why is the race so hard?

Well, if you're asking that question, you're in the company of the Hebrews. If you feel like this, you're in good company. So let's look at the first thing our passage says. Chapter 10, verses 32 to 39.

We must endure or all is lost. We must endure or all is lost. If we don't endure the distance we have already covered, all has been for nothing.

If we don't endure, the distance we have run is for nothing. We lose all the promises of Christ if we stop running now.

[13:21] The writer has went to great effort to show us that Jesus is greater than the old Jewish system. And he now urges his listeners to persevere, to keep going.

That may seem strange. If the new system is so much better, if Christ is so great, why would endurance be an issue? Why would it be a struggle?

Well, that's exactly what's behind the questions I started with. If these things resonate with you, then what you're asking is, is it really worth enduring?

The writer says, in 1035 to 36, Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward, for you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

Don't throw away your confidence. You need to endure. Don't stop running the race. That's his point. Why?

[14:30] Verse 32, But recall the former days, when after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle. The Hebrew Christians started off well, maybe much like you.

They put up with a lot. They bought into sacrifice and suffering as part of their faith. They had compassion in those in prison. In verse 34, they accepted plundering of their property.

They endured hard struggles that brought suffering. In verse 32, some faced public scorn, and some stood with those who did. Verse 33, So to say, well, being a Christian is hard.

Look, I've tried. I have endured. I've cared for those worse off than me. I have suffered. You can't say that I haven't put up with a lot.

That may sound like a fair statement. So whilst Christ is supposedly better than what they have left behind, better than constantly needing to make sacrifices for their sins, that it's better than the presence of God only being in the most holy place, better than the law as our mediator.

[15:45] Well, you may say this is all better, that Christ is better, but what I experience now says different. How can it be better? It doesn't feel better.

We have to put up with all manner of difficulty for it. Does that sound familiar? Well, if it does, and if you think like this, the writer of Hebrews has a response for you.

He says in verse 37 that the coming one will come. Jesus will return. There is a day approaching that will see Jesus return.

And then he says in verse 38, the righteous one will live by faith. But those who shrink back, those who turn away from their faith, those who stop running, will have no favor before God.

When Jesus returns in the future, if we have fallen away, if we have given up, we will bring him no pleasure.

[16:52] That's a serious warning. A warning he repeats from verse 26, that if we give up now, then there is no sacrifice for our sin. And so all has been lost.

We are left hopeless. But then the writer associates himself with them. And he states confidently in verse 39, but we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

He knows that they believe. He's witnessed it. So he now assures them that they are not going to be amongst those who give up. And verse 39 here is key.

From it flows the great chapter on the heroes of the faith. Verse 39 puts the Hebrew Christians in the company of the faithful people of God in the Old Testament.

We are not of those who shrink back and give up, but of those who have faith. We are of those who finish the race. And so this is where attention turns to the great examples of persevering faith in chapter 11.

[18:09] It starts by defining what it is and then proceeds to illustrate it in the lives of the faithful. To recap, we must endure.

That's our first point. The superior nature of the Christian faith against the old Jewish one is rendered meaningless unless we keep going.

We are without hope if we don't finish the race. That's the thrust of these verses at the end of chapter 10. Now perhaps you're sitting there feeling flatter than ever.

We must endure. That sounds like hard work. That doesn't sound like Christ is better. But the next thing our passage shows us is the means to endure.

Let's look then at the thrust of chapter 11. How we endure. We look to the future, not the present. How we endure.

[19:11] We look to the future, not the present. And our attention here is the whole of chapter 11. Faith, as we see in this chapter, is people with trying, difficult lives, looking to the future and not getting downbeat about the present.

Enduring now by looking to the enjoyment of the future. 11.1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

That is a future-looking statement. What we hope for is always in the relation to the future. Hope, by its very nature, is looking to something that we desire to happen.

So faith, for those in this chapter, and for us, is being sure of the promises of God. Being confident in what God has promised in the new covenant, as Bob was explaining this morning.

And so convinced that that which we don't and can't see now is still a certainty. From verse 1, the focus is on the future.

[20:31] All that we have now, we have only by faith. But in the future, we will one day have it by sight. That's what faith is.

It's looking forwards. It's having in mind that God will certainly keep his promises to us in the future. But that day is in the future.

It's not now. Not in the present. We have the hope of heaven, the hope of perfect communion with God by trusting that what God promises in the future, he will certainly deliver.

So let's see how this plays out in the real lives of those who have followed God. There are many people in this chapter, so instead of looking at each one individually, we want to see the thread that joins them all together.

And in order to do this, we need to ask the question, what do they have in common? The simple answer could be faith. But moving beyond that, why these particular figures?

[21:37] After all, there were others in the Old Testament that displayed faith, so it must be something more specific. You see, the writer in this chapter is putting flesh to his exhortation in 10:35, where he says, to not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

He is illustrating what it looks like to run the race the whole way, what it looks like to not stop running. And he does this by constantly referring to the great reward that was looked to.

The repetitive idea in this chapter is that in what seems hard now, we endure it because of our sure future. We don't throw away our confidence in the present because we know what the future will bring.

We will keep running like Mo Farah because we have the finish line always in sight. the difference between Mo Farah and young, overweight, asthmatic Josh or whoever else had that experience is that one has the finish line in sight and one has the pain of the race in sight.

So let's take Abraham. Look with me at verses 8 to 11. We see that Abraham went out not knowing where he was going.

[23 : 08] He left his home and lived with Isaac and Jacob in tents in the land promised. These were heirs of the great covenant. Why on earth would they leave to go and live in tents?

Look at verse 10. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. Abraham was looking forward not caught up in the present and with what was uncomfortable and what was lacking but he was looking forward to a better place.

He was living with his eyes on the future on the finish line as was Sarah in verse 11. She was past the age to conceive.

She had a barren womb but by faith she did conceive because she considered God who had made the promise to be faithful to keep it.

She was looking to the future and in that God was faithful. Again Abraham in verses 17 to 19 these highlights that he cared more about his future hope than his present hurt.

[24 : 27] he was prepared to offer his son the son he waited for so long in order to endure now that he might receive the promise of the future.

And we see in verses 13 to 16 these all died in faith not having received the things promised but having seen them and greeted them from afar.

they acknowledged that they were strangers in exiles but seeking a homeland. They were looking to the future looking to the finish line where God has prepared a better place a heavenly city in verse 16 for them.

whereas if they had been concerned chiefly with now with delight now with all good things now they could have returned to where they had come from in verse 15 they could have had an easier life but they desired a better country the heavenly city and God was pleased to be called their gods he was pleased to be called their gods and he had the city prepared for them he has it prepared for us when that future day comes Moses too if we look at verse 26 considered the reproach of Christ with all that that brings of far greater wealth than the present treasures of Egypt he could have lived out his life in the royal palace in luxury in wealth but he chose the reproach of

Christ all the way through this chapter we have this looking to the future for the better thing the heavenly city the promise that will be fully and finally fulfilled forever with God and then verses 32 to 38 we see the judges the anointed king of Israel David and the prophets essentially the whole history of the Old Testament summed up and in it we see that by faith whether in victory or as victims the world was not worthy of them verse 38 this world was not worthy of the faithful people of God because they were willing to be tortured mocked flogged and to face all manner of harshness now so that verse 35 so that they might rise again to a better life faith is people with trying and difficult

[27 : 29] Christian lives looking to the future and so the thrust of this whole chapter is summed up in the concluding two verses 39 and 40 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 this list of heroes of the faith only received glimpses of the promises made to them but all of them were looking forward to and anticipating a far greater future hope sharing in the new covenant which is part of the one covenant as Bob explained sharing with us and the benefits of it looking to the heavenly city of verse 16 all God's faithful people made perfect together with him in his heavenly kingdom we must endure and we have seen how to endure so if you have come this evening feeling flat needing refreshment finding it hard we need to remember the future to have the finish line in sight we all feel to do this to some degree we choose not to believe

Christ is better we don't live with our eyes fixed on the future sometimes we may have one on the future but we get caught up in the present the want to be content and happy to have pleasure with no pain and no struggle all this now so when you're clicking through your web browser to look at those illicit images to bring pleasure now you have your eyes on the present when we are all conflicted about giving money to gospel work because it means that new car those new curtains an engagement ring or the latest Apple product will not be ours when we're conflicted like this we do not have our eyes on the future when you're marginalized in the workplace when

I want to blend in with everyone else because I fear mocking and ridicule for believing the gospel we need to fix our eyes on the future when I struggle to serve with a willing heart I would rather my treasure be here on earth where people serve us serve me because of my status than to have my treasure be the future my treasure be heavenly the prepared city when you want to return to your old religious system where your good deeds bring you favour with God one more kind action and I can take comfort that God loves me more now then we want blessing now and we don't have our eyes on the future enduring through this is what the writer of Hebrews wants his hearers to get don't go back to the old system to

Judaism keep your eye on the future look at all the heroes who didn't panic through much worse than we do but did so knowing what was better and longing for that glorious heavenly city of course now you can see this in an unrealistic way by thinking this means that the present won't be a struggle if only we look forward while endurance is seldom easy we shouldn't expect the present to be glamorous there will be times we feel like the asthmatic runner again that will happen it is then that we must not focus on the pain of running but on the pleasure of finishing not focus on the pain of running but the pleasure of finishing and this is where a third thing in the passage comes in we can endure because the faithful do finish we can endure because the faithful do finish we look now at chapter 12 verses 1 to 3 the flow of this therefore is again from 1039 it flows through the illustration of chapter 11 and so it reads therefore because we are not of those who give up or shrink back but of those who keep running and look to the finish line therefore let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely because we are in the company of those witnesses all those in chapter 11 people who have finished the race those who came to the end of their lives persevering and having faith they prove that we can indeed finish endurance is possible because we have examples to encourage us

I remember the first holiday my family had to the Mediterranean my oldest brother and I jogged down to the edge of the land ready to jump into the lovely Mediterranean water before suddenly looking at each other and thinking there may be rocks down there could be dangerous so we shouted for our other brother who without thinking sprints down and plunges himself in we stand and wait observing finally his head pops up and we knew it was safe we knew we could do it because we had a witness showing that it was possible so let us throw off let us get rid of anything that will make life now seem more important that is let us get rid of anything that keeps our attention on the present and away from the future that's what will hinder us that's what will stop us from finishing whether it be an unhelpful relationship someone who influences us for the worse get rid of it any lazy habits that point us away from

[34 : 31] Jesus get rid of them fight habits like lust that will make us want pleasure now we need to shed anything that will prevent us getting to the finish line anything that will make us love the present life more than the prize there are two encouragements in doing this the first as mentioned is the people who have already finished they prove that it's possible they show us that we can finish the second we meet in verse two looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him the joy set before him because he was looking to the future endured the cross Jesus too followed this model he went to the cross accepting trial and suffering in the present why for the joy that was set before him

Christ too had the future in mind his finished work his people made perfect and now he sits at the right hand of the throne of God look again at verse two he sits at the right hand of the throne of God we should never down play the significance of that statement Jesus sitting at the right hand of God shows us the victory we have in Christ back in chapter 10 verse 12 the writer uses the same phrase he says and every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away our take away sins but when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins he sat down at the right hand of God our future is secure we can finish because no longer is our sin needing dealt with before

God Christ sits because his single sacrifice was for all time it was final in complete contrast to the old covenant sacrifices we can finish because Christ has already dealt with our stumbling along the race when we lose sight of the finish line when we wobble Christ has covered us to keep on running so we must endure and so finally looking at verse three consider him consider him who endured such hostility with the future in mind consider Christ that we not grow weary or faint hearted that we won't shrink back or throw away our confidence that we do not stop running we must endure we are shown how to endure and we can endure the faithful will finish yes we will feel flat at some point but

we must not panic we need to know sometimes that we will be like the kid at the back of the race we will but we will fail to finish only if we constantly want comfort pleasure and ease now if we want all things now the best of life now then we won't finish well we will go flat we will need refreshment we will grow weary but the faithful who have in mind the better city the glorious heavenly one they will finish and how wonderful it will be to no longer need our inhalers for we will be in the place christ has prepared for us fitting yourself for the future will enable you to endure to the end so before we sing the wonderful hymn about the place christ has prepared for us let's pray heavenly father we do thank you that christ is better that all the promises you've given us by your grace are better so lord we do we do ask for your grace to help us keep them in mind to keep the future the glorious future that is sure for us in mind that we would keep running keep persevering not content with pleasures now if it robs us of our glorious future so help us lord encourage us that it's possible when we feel weary encourage us that we can finish because of all that your son has done and all those faithful people who have went before us lord we thank you and ask for your help in
Jesus name amen ch oh