

Hebrews 11:29-12:2-40

Chapter 11 of Hebrews has been reminding us of those who have gone before us who had faith, who trusted and followed God, even though they never saw the all the plans he revealed to them.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (Heb11:1).

The writer is helping Christians who are struggling with hostility, ridicule, and shame to keep following Jesus. These believers faced some of the discouragements we face. He suggests that faith can be fully understood only in terms of the larger story of promise reaching back to ancient ancestors, who were themselves strangers, people who didn't quite fit in, pilgrims even when they were in the land of promise, like Abraham.

Faith is the courage to endure, even when we don't have the thing in our hands that we long for. The purpose of this passage is to encourage the Christian community to stay faithful to God in the face of the challenges of life. It reminds us that while living the faithful life has always been a challenge, God's people can trust their king. That faith in God allows people to see beyond what is right in front of them, their daily problems, to what God is doing in their midst, to see what he has done throughout the ages, and to see the future he has in store. It lifts our eyes above our circumstance. Faith is what we start with when we begin the journey with Jesus, it's what we need in the middle of the journey and it's what we will need to finish well.

The faithful people described in the passage, though, are not successful by the world's standards, they look like fools and failures. The writer doesn't describe them having material blessings as signs of their faithfulness - a comfortable home and a well-fed family; he doesn't say their strength came from having settled and stable lives so they could meet their goals; or that they trusted in God because he gave them freedom from war and tyrannical leaders; he doesn't say the things God asked them to do were easy to understand or follow; he doesn't say their faithfulness **prevented** them from being thrown into dangerous situations or losing their life; or that people loved them because of their faithfulness; or even that God gave them everything he spoke to them about in their earthly lifetimes.

The writer talks about the ancient believers having confidence to walk their path with God no matter where it took them, and what it brought them. Whether it meant living in a tent all their life, or a hole in the ground, or dressing in rags and sheepskin. Whether it meant crazily believing they would conceive a child promised by God against all probability; or if it meant stepping into the bed of the Red Sea to cross over, with the water close beside them, and an army on their heels; whether it meant following God's instructions to walk around a city 7 times, trusting that a trumpet blast was all that was needed to reduce it to rubble or trusting God to help them administer justice, when it would have been easier to look after their own interests. These ancient believers are commended for their faith because they trusted God, even if refusing to deny their Lord meant facing jeers and

flogging, seeing your child die and be raised again, even if it meant being thrown into a lion's pit or a fiery furnace, or being sentenced to death by stoning or being sawn in two.

They held tight to their trust in God even when disaster faced them and they didn't receive the things they longed for. Their faith in God held them firm not their nerve, they remained convinced that he was worth following and worth trusting. These ancient believers stand as examples to us, and as a cloud of witnesses to God's overarching faithfulness to them. They stand in the stadium seats cheering us on as we face our own trials. They overcame their circumstances through the one who gave them strength and challenge us to depend on his strength too.

Faith in this passage is not about our trusting ourselves. Trust is outwardly focused. We trust the God who stayed true to our ancestors and will stay true to us. What a source of encouragement. There are many who have gone before us, on smooth paths and rough, up hill and down, and who have completed their race because of the one they trusted in.

Let us hear our brothers and sisters voices across the ages cheering us on, as we run our marathon. Inspired by their example and encouragement, and in order that we run a race worthy of our Saviour, as the writer from Hebrews challenges us, let us throw off everything that so easily hinders our efforts, the things that weigh us down and trip us up. The things that prevent us from running our personal best. Let's listen to the Scriptures, and to the Lord in prayer, and work out what those things are for us and remove them from our lives.

So what might we need to cast off so we can run our race? Maybe there are things that ought to move further down the list of priorities in our life so that Jesus is at the top. Maybe we need to do a bit of spiritual training to tighten up flabby muscles, that might mean spending time with God, or being thankful for what he has given us.

Maybe we are too easily accommodating ourselves to the things of privilege in our world, settling for comfort above growth. Maybe we have bad habits we need to let go of so we can follow Jesus more easily.

Maybe we despair of real structural change in our behaviour, in our hearts and our attitude, because we realise how difficult it is and what it may cost us.

But casting of the things that weigh us down is worth the effort, for only then we will run our race better, with endurance and perseverance. We need both of these characteristics if we are running a marathon rather than a sprint.

There is more encouragement for us in this passage, for both the ancient believers and we understand that Jesus is the one who marked our their race. He is the one in whom our faith is kicked off, and the one who has run the race ahead of us, blazing a clear path. He perfected what it is to be human, showed us how to do it, gave us his life and his Spirit so we can make our journey, and he sits at the finish line calling us on to meet him.

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And when our time is done, we will see him face to face. And when we stand in the stadium, may our life inspire others to keep up the pace, and run with perseverance the race set before them. So for now, let us run well, and finish well. And to God be the glory in all that he does in and through us on the track that is ours.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. 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 (Heb12:2).