

## Introduction

I want this morning to take a close look at the opening words of **Hebrews 12** to discover what we can glean from three fascinating verses. Unusually for me I have a three point sermon based on three action verbs all of which focus on our lives in Jesus Christ and all of which point to Him. Over the next few minutes I want us to consider the thoughts of Run, Look and Endure in our Christian lives.

Before we do that we need to understand some of the background to the Epistle and those who received it. There are many Epistles in the New Testament and we know that they were written by Paul, James, John and Peter. However, the author of this Epistle to the Hebrews is anonymous and not clearly identifiable. Many believed that the Epistle was written by Paul given his knowledge of the church and the style of his use of Greek. Others felt that it may have been written by Barnabas or even Luke writing in the style of Paul or perhaps documenting one of Paul's sermons. Still others felt that it may have been written by any one of a number of other prominent Jewish Christians. Regardless of who actually put pen to paper as it were, this Epistle is the Word of God and should be regarded as such when we read and study it.

The recipients of this Epistle had suffered great persecution in the past and were still being persecuted at the time they received the letter. Whilst it's not entirely clear who they were they may well have been a group of Jews from the Dispersion who now lived in Rome although there are some suggestions that they were in Spain. However, most scholars favour Italy as being their home. They had probably heard the gospel from the Apostle's teaching rather than directly from Jesus Himself, and since confessing Him as Lord they had suffered persecution and shame and were frequently expelled from various Jewish institutions. The original readers of the Epistle were tested and tempted to turn away from their faith and to fall into unbelief by giving up on their daily walk towards God's rest and God's city. The writer warned them in **4:1**, "*Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*" (**4:1**); he adds in **4:11**, "*Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*" (**4:11**). The writer also reminded them of what was to come when he said of Abraham, "*For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*" (**11:10**). What a promise and what a future awaits us if we remain faithful to God just as Abraham did. Further encouragement comes in **11:16** where we are reminded that, "*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.*" The "*they*" referred to are all those mentioned in **Hebrews 11** and the city being prepared is the new Jerusalem which is referred to in **Revelation 3:12**. As if that promise isn't enough the writer adds in **13:14**, "*For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*"

All of this was intended to encourage the Hebrew believers to persevere in their faith knowing what was to come. That could be why many thought the Epistle was written by Barnabas who was known for his great skill of encouraging people.

## Run

When a verse or a passage begins with the word "*therefore*" it generally means that the writer is referring back to something they have just said in the preceding verse or verses. In

this instance the writer is referring back to what he had to say about faith in [Hebrews 11](#). The whole of that chapter is concerned with the faith of a great number of people and the majority of those referred to maintained and built on their faith despite the difficulties they faced. The writer mentions Abel and his sacrifice; Enoch whose faith meant that he didn't die but was simply taken away by God; Noah who ignored the ridicule and continued to build the Ark. He kept his faith and the writer says of him, "*By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*" ([11:7](#)). The writer also talks of many others whose faith was maintained despite opposition, difficulties, ridicule and persecution.

The purpose of mentioning these people was to encourage the Hebrews and the rest of us in our daily walk with Christ. Those talked of in [Hebrews 11](#) suffered for their faith but were rewarded for their perseverance. Probably the most well known and remembered of these people was Abraham who trusted God to be with him at all times and in all situations. For example, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless and were well on in years and yet God told Abraham in [Genesis 17:4](#) that, "*As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.*" Although hard to accept, Abraham believed God and God counted him as righteous as a result. God frequently promises us things that we may find to be totally unachievable and yet if we trust Him He will keep His promise. God did indeed keep His promise and Abraham & Sarah had a son named Isaac. Later when Isaac was still a young boy, Abraham was prepared to sacrifice him on what he believed was God's command since his faith told him that all would be well and God would care for him and never let him down. God didn't let him down since we know from [Genesis 22:12](#) that God stayed Abraham's hand and prevented him from going through with that sacrificial act.

All of the people mentioned in [Hebrews 11](#) should serve as an example to all believers today on how to live their lives in faith. The first verse of [Hebrews 12](#) calls them a "*great cloud of witnesses*". These people witnessed to their faith by their actions and by the fact that God recognised that faith and counted it to them as righteousness; in other words because of their strong and unshakeable faith, God forgave them and welcomed them into His family. They were surrounded by persecution, problems and temptation, all of which they resisted because of their faith in God.

Sin most definitely still exists in the world today and in many ways may be worse than it was in Old Testament times. The writer accepts this but urges his readers, and us, to "*throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles*" ([12:1](#)). Notice that phrase "*sin that so easily entangles*". That is how sin works; it is just like that Japanese knotweed that we hear so much about. That plant looks attractive but beneath the surface it is burrowing and entangling everything that stands in its path. The enemy knows that and so tempts us with attractive and harmless looking sins that will entangle us and pull us away from Christ.

Finally in [12:1](#) the writer urges us to "*run with perseverance the race marked out for us*". Many people, including the Apostle Paul, liken the Christian life to a running race. That may well be true since the Christian life is wonderful but needs to be seen as a marathon rather than a sprint; in fact it may be closer to a steeplechase since it is a longer distance than a sprint and has many obstacles in our path. These obstacles should be seen as "*everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles*" ([12:1b](#)) which I mentioned a moment ago. That "*great cloud of witnesses*" ([12:1a](#)) should be our inspiration as none of them had things easy; the important thing is that they persevered and kept going despite all the

difficulties placed in their way. We too need to “*run with perseverance*” (12:1c) since the race has been “*marked out for us*” (12:1c) and it is a race that leads to a life spent in paradise with Jesus.

## Look

Not only do we have that “*cloud of witnesses*” from Hebrews 11 to look to but we also have our Lord and Saviour Jesus to look to as the ultimate role model. At the beginning of 12:2 in the NIV translation that we are using, the writer tells us to run by “*fixing our eyes on Jesus*”. That is a fascinating phrase and suggestion but isn’t quite what the original Greek says or implies. Different translations of the passage come up with different ways of expressing the thought of focussing on Jesus as we live our daily lives with Him. You may wonder if this is simply an academic point that is of no importance to any of us. However, I would suggest that it is important since the Greek carries a far fuller meaning than that suggested by the NIV translation.

The original Greek that the NIV translates as “*fix your eyes*” is *aphorōntes* a word which carries the meaning of looking towards something whilst looking away from something else. In other words in this context we should think of looking away from the world and towards Jesus. Consequently the ESV translates 12:2 as beginning: “*looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith ...*” whilst the pidgin English translation of the original Greek in my interlinear Bible says “*looking away to the faith author and finisher Jesus*”. Many of the translations that I have consulted bring out the thought of both looking to or at Jesus whilst looking away from the sins of the world which have been referred to in 12:1. Jesus died on the cross of Calvary to pay for our sins; having accepted Him as our Lord and Saviour the very least we can do is to turn away from the world that tries to entangle us and turn towards Him; focussing only on Him and all that He has done and all that He continues to do for us.

Whilst there are many examples of people of great faith in Hebrews 11, Jesus is the greatest example for us to follow as we grow in faith. Many young people today who want to excel in sport tend to watch their heroes and try and emulate their style and way of performing; think of golf, tennis, football and so on. Only by watching, learning and practicing can they hope to improve. If we want to grow in our faith and draw nearer to Jesus then we should look to Jesus and Him alone. The “*cloud of witnesses*” referred to in Hebrews 11 are great role models but the ultimate role model is Jesus and it is Him we should try to emulate. Apart from Jesus being totally obedient to His Father and completely sin free, He also displayed many desirable human characteristics. Two examples that spring to mind come in Matthew 6:24 where we read “*Jesus had compassion*” and in John 11:35 we read “*Jesus wept*”. Those are just 2 examples of Jesus’ humanity and show how He behaved and responded in His way of life, and we are urged to follow Him.

There are many names for Jesus that appear throughout the Bible, my own personal favourites coming in Isaiah 9:6 where the prophet says that the baby to be born would “... *be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*” Here in 12:2 the writer calls Jesus, “*pioneer and perfecter of our faith*” although some translations use the name “*author*” rather than “*founder*”. The thought of “*founder*” probably fits better although the Greek uses words that translate as “*author and finisher*”! All very confusing! The important thing is that Jesus both founded the faith and finished or perfected it on the cross of Calvary. In 2:10 the writer says, “*In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that*

*God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”* The One Who made our salvation perfect through suffering is very obviously Jesus Who, although already perfect, hung and suffered on the cross of Calvary to make our salvation perfect. It isn't just the writer to the Hebrews who calls Jesus the “*author*”. When speaking to a crowd who had seen him heal a crippled beggar, Peter reminded them that they “*had killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead*” ([Acts 3:15](#)).

## Endure

When we think of joy we tend to think of something that makes us happy. Getting married; the birth of a child; success at sport; promotion at work; they are all moments when we tend to experience a level of joy that is different to other times. Imagine though experiencing joy at the prospect of being tortured, ridiculed and executed in the most brutal fashion; would that bring you joy? It certainly isn't the kind of joy that Paul talks of at length in his Epistle to the Philippians. However, Jesus experienced a different type of joy as He looked forward and saw what was going to happen to Him.

Jesus endured the cross for us; for the joy of knowing that all who placed their faith in Him would be forgiven and would receive the great gift of eternal life; a life spent in paradise with Him. The pain that Jesus endured came on different levels. Firstly there was the shame of being hung on a wooden cross. Crucifixion was the brutal method of execution that was favoured by the Romans and it was generally reserved for the worst murderers and terrorists although was never used against Roman citizens. However, as Isaiah reminds us, Jesus was totally innocent and “*he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth*” ([Isaiah 53:9](#)). Being hung on a cross, or tree as it is often referred to, also brought shame. In Deuteronomy we read, “*If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.*” ([Deuteronomy 21:22-23](#)). Note that, “*anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*”. Here though we have the Son of God being “*hung on a tree*” meaning that He too was under a curse. However, that wasn't because of anything He had done but rather because He was paying the price for all the things we had done; Jesus carried that curse on our behalf. Jesus was indeed paying the price for our sins just as Peter tells us when he too refers to Jesus dying on a tree. The Apostle says in [1 Peter 2:24](#), “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*”

Secondly, Jesus endured the incredible physical pain that His torture brought with it. He was flogged until close to death; He had that mocking crown of thorns rammed onto His head; and He endured the pain of those nails being hammered through His hands and His feet. And then, as He hung there dying He had a spear thrust into His side. Jesus did manage to avoid one element of pain that was generally inflicted on those hanging on a cross. Soldiers would wander around checking those hanging there and, to speed the process, break the legs of any that weren't dead. Jesus died before that could happen and so in keeping with prophecy, not a bone in His body was broken.

Finally, not only did Jesus endure the intense physical pain that His treatment and execution brought; but He also endured emotional and spiritual pain. You see, for a while as Jesus hung dying on the cross, His Father deserted Him. God left His Son in the

darkness that all those who don't accept Christ as their Saviour will experience when they die. At that point there will be no turning back; no second chance; it will be too late. All that they will know from that point on is the bleak and dark prospect of being cut off from God for all eternity. That is what Christ endured for us, hence His words on the cross, "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*" (**Matthew 27:46**). Those words of Jesus on the cross echo those of David in **Psalm 22:1** where he wrote, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?*" That is an incredibly desolate cry from Jesus which surely shows the depth of His distress as He suffered separation from His Father. Those words in **Psalm 22:1** are made all the more poignant when you consider that they were written hundreds of years before Jesus died on that evil cross. Throughout His earthly ministry Jesus had had His Father with Him every step of the way; now, He was alone; alone in the inky and bleak darkness of being cut off from God. That was surely His ultimate suffering and ultimate endurance.

Returning to the thought of joy; just what was the joy that Jesus was looking forward to that enabled Him to endure all this suffering? The writer to the Hebrews tells us quite clearly that Jesus "*scorned its shame [that is the cross], and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*" (**12:2b**). That was Jesus' reward for all His suffering, although He also had the joy of knowing that He had paid the price for the sins of all those who would come to faith in Him as Lord and Saviour.

## Conclusion

Jesus suffered and died on the cross willingly to pay the full price for our sins. He was prepared to endure the pain and the shame of that death as well as the "*opposition from sinners*" (**12:3**) for the joy that awaited Him; that joy of being able to sit at His Father's right hand and to know that all those who accepted Him as their Lord and Saviour would be forgiven for their sins and spend eternity with Him in paradise.

Given all that, it seems reasonable to suggest that we should look to Jesus as our supreme example as we persevere in our Christian walk. When we look to Him we should all be encouraged not to "*grow weary and lose heart*" (**12:3**).

The Passion Translation of the Bible tends to be more of a paraphrase but puts the main thought of this passage very clearly when it says, "*We look away from the natural realm and we focus our attention and expectation onto Jesus who birthed faith within us and who leads us forward into faith's perfection*" (**12:2**). We can surely do no worse in our Christian lives than to heed those words and look to Jesus every day.